

**THE UNIVERSITY AS POLITICAL: UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF A  
STUDENTS' UNION IN WESTERN CANADA**

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By

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## Abstract

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide important services they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

Within Baldrige's (1971) political framework, the Students' Union Executive was excluded from bureaucratic authority structures. The Executive was integrated into the university's social system as *professionals*—similarly to faculty members—within the collegial governance authority system. The students' union acted as 'the voice of students', even though the Executive did not claim to represent all students. The Executive argued that the most engaged students—radicals—wanted little to do with them. Regardless, many student representatives felt their experience within university governance structures was tokenistic and lacked real power. Due to this lack of access within the formal system, students had a limited ability to participate

in the negotiation of the university's organizational culture (Bates, 1981; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). Executive members tended to reject coercive tactics as they derived much of their power from the use of personal-influence resources (Baldrige, 1971).

Student leaders relied on their capacity to use personal influence to assert power and affect change. This was very exclusive access to university decision making processes to which no other student was privy. Radicals, as such, were not able to pass the legitimacy test to which the student Executive was subject. To pass, students had to learn to operate within both the university and students' union cultural assumptions by becoming cultural chameleons. These different basic cultural assumptions between the students' union and their university counterparts were all legitimate and valid; they existed as part of the layered culture of the university.

In the end, the students' union and the university administration had the same basic understanding of the purpose of the students' union: service delivery and representation of the undergraduate students. However, individuals within the Executive and university administration approached these ideas very differently. Within this theoretical framework those approaches were all valid, but were not given equal weight in the negotiation of culture. This dissertation did not uncover reality in its totality, but it did advance some questions about how that reality is actualized at academia's home.

To Mark

A champion for friendship, knowledge, and social justice

*Raisin' the jar an raisin' hell  
There's plenty of stories that they will tell  
Some were born of true detail  
Some were purely fiction  
- Rankin Family*

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## Preface

One outcome of my research has been that university administrators may not have or take the time to reflect on larger questions about their role within the university, to their detriment. With this lesson, I would like to reflect on the purpose of doctoral education and the production of a dissertation and how this has influenced its design and expression before I explore my own research and its questions.

At its core, the purpose of a doctoral education is to complete requirements necessary to receive a credential. This is generally completed through several processes including coursework, examinations, and considerable research and scholarly output most traditionally in the form of a dissertation; requirements, norms, and processes will differ from one academic department to the next. In education, we are encouraged to continually reflect upon our learning and to see our learning as a lifelong process. The dissertation, then, is in a large way a record of that learning. Bolker (1998) spoke of the dissertation enabling students to “develop passion, curiosity, and questions about your topic” (p. 4). She encouraged students to identify why they were writing a dissertation, and then to use that purpose to “write your way in.” This means:

how not to talk away your ideas or lose them in mental gymnastics. You will learn to write in order to think, to encourage thought, to tease thought out of chaos or out of fright. You will write constantly, and continuously, at every stage, to name your topic and to find your way into it. You will learn to write past certainty, past prejudice, through

contradiction, and into complexity. You will come to write out of your own self, and, eventually, even though you may be afraid of what your reader will say, you will learn to write in a way that will allow you to be heard. (Bolker, 1998, p. 5)

There will be more traditional academic journal articles to come out of this dissertation; however, that is not the precise purpose for its writing. My dissertation is a record not only of an original research study and the development of theory, but it showcases my growth as a researcher and a learner. Friends and family who have written a dissertation have described the process as torturous and traumatic, and I can identify with those experiences now that I am at the end of my own journey; it is an incredibly personal document and process. I have grown in leaps and bounds both professionally and personally throughout the past few years, enabled in part by a writing processes that pushed me to “think, to explore, to blunder, to question yourself, to express frustration, to question further, to get to what feels like the truth of your subject” (Bolker, 1998, p. xiv).

We don’t like to talk about personal weaknesses and failures in academia. A professor at Princeton published a CV of his failures that went viral; it prompted such a response from the academic community it was picked up by the Guardian and Harvard Business Review (Haushofer, 2016). Because of our inability to frankly discuss challenges and failures, mental and emotional health is ignored as we often try to hide our flaws, and we present our work and ourselves as if it were perfect from the beginning. This is not realistic for the clear majority of prospective and current graduate students. I want any student looking back at my work to see it as it

happened: full of imperfections and meandering formation. This was part by design; why else would I choose an almost ignored topic for an already challenging process?

Additionally, the topic of my dissertation is very near and dear to my heart. Student politics has been formative in my personal and professional development. I am studying students' unions because I know them to be a powerful force and important part of any Canadian university community. Through my experiences as a student leader, and now as a graduate student engaged in the world of student services and university governance, I know there are fundamental misunderstandings as to what students' unions do in within the university community. Canadian higher education research, much like many disciplines, is overrun with American research that just plainly does not consider students' unions as they need to be considered in the Canadian context. I will discuss this further in Chapter 1, but this experience is central to my ability to write this dissertation.

While I cannot yet claim to be an 'expert', I have a certain level of expertise in student politics and university governance that has influenced how my research progressed. I have unique experiences that allow me to claim a certain level of *emic* and *etic* perspectives as a researcher, enabling me to understand the situation on a much deeper level (Danquah & Miller, 2007). Sometimes decisions were made based on the knowledge I brought as a researcher. Some may call this a 'bias' that needs to be controlled for; instead my research and theoretical framework enables me to use my knowledge as a frame through which to understand the data. A more thorough discussion of potential researcher bias will be had in Chapter 3. What is important to understand now, however, is that my voice is present in every aspect

of the research. One means to address bias concerns is to open myself up as a researcher to the readers, which corresponds to my reflective writing approach. I aim to explain my thinking and thought processes throughout this dissertation, which will enable readers to know me in a very intimate manner. With this information, the hope is readers will interpret my words and findings through a lens of my own understanding of reality and the world, which forms the theoretical framework for this dissertation. My framework is based in a critical and constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as they are conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists. The body of this dissertation will expand on the theoretical frame for my research, but I wanted to touch on the importance these two authors have made to my understanding of the world around me and my place within the social. Through reading their ideas and contrasting them with the experience of my lifeworld—including this research—I came to know myself in a whole new manner. While I was writing Chapters Five and Six, I learned that my father used Habermas in his theoretical framework for his own doctoral dissertation in educational administration in the department at the University of Saskatchewan. I wish I had known earlier; this man's writing influenced me as a small child, and I did not know it.

This dissertation is a reflection on the learning I have gained throughout the last five years; it is me—in 250-odd pages—not only as a researcher, but as a student, a friend, a community member, and a partner. I am incredibly proud of what I have done and who I am continuing to become. My greatest fear is of the

unknown, and I have used this process as an excuse and an exercise in throwing myself into the intellectual unknown—both my own and my academic community's.

## **Chapter 1: The Beginning**

Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties my conceptual framework of political and cultural organizational theory together and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldridge, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

Chapter One provides the foundation upon which the entire dissertation is constructed, and acts as a guide for readers to interpret the research and its process. I begin with a robust explanation as to how the topic came to be and provide justification for it; this is a personal research topic and the reader can only fully appreciate the outcomes of my research with a detailed understanding of my motivations for the research. Next, I present the bones of the research study are outlined; this includes the purpose statement that guided the research, the questions I wanted to answer, how I answered those questions, and the limitations and assumptions that served to contain and explain. The major concepts and ideas presented in this chapter will be explored in depth in Chapter Two. Chapter One is



to act as a reference to assist the reader in understanding the wider context of the research.

### **Development of an Idea**

Politics have always been foundational to my life, both professionally, academically, and personally. When I was five, one of my earliest memories is meeting Saskatchewan Provincial Premier Roy Romanow at a gala with my father. My father introduced me as his daughter, Josie, and the Premier shook my hand and said “Hello, daughter Josie” as he chuckled. This interest in politics followed me to university where I majored in political studies and became involved in my first week in campus and partisan politics.

After several years of involvement in the provincial youth wing of a political party, I left partisan politics to play a larger role in my students’ union. In 2007 I ran for, and won, the office of Vice President (Academic Affairs) of the University of Saskatchewan Students’ Union. This experience set me on a very different trajectory, and taught me several incredibly important life lessons. The next year I ran for, and won, the Presidency. At 22, I led a non-profit organization with a \$4 million annual budget with more than 20 full-time permanent staff and that owned and operated multiple businesses; I suddenly had immense responsibilities to my electorate that I was only beginning to theoretically understand. To say I came across numerous personal and professional challenges would be an understatement. These two years that I spent on the Executive Committee of my students’ union were transformational.

I spent a fair amount of my time within the students' union focused on governance and policy. At conferences, I found myself fascinated with the different models of student governance in operation across Canada, and constantly sought out new student leaders to discuss organizational structures, political strategies, and how they fared in their interactions with their administration. I met dozens of passionate leaders who continue to amaze me with their ongoing achievements and their continued perseverance in the cause of social justice. I was amazed that other students' unions had such a difficult time working with their administration; the positive relationship my team enjoyed soon became the source of envy for some.

I began to think about these issues with an academic lens after my time on the students' union's Executive Committee (hereafter referred to as the *Executive*). I completed my Master's in political science in Ottawa, where I learned just how diverse students' unions are within Canada. To me, the students' unions in Ontario felt militant and confrontational. To them, I was too sympathetic to university bureaucracy and the government. It was an entirely different culture of student politics. During this time, the student strike in Québec generated an abundance of discussion on student politics, and often I had to defend myself after being revealed as a former student leader. These experiences continued throughout my master's education, and as I wrote papers for my political science courses and worked in Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in the Learning Branch—now known as Employment and Social Development Canada—I realized my passion was not necessary in political science, but in the actualization of policies and the impact those policies have in creating a better and more equitable world. These are not

motivations that are easily fulfilled within political science. My focus was quickly re-directed towards education, which is the world I largely grew up in with two educators for parents.

When I finally arrived for my doctoral studies in Saskatchewan, I did not know exactly what I wanted to research. My Master's research investigated supports for Indigenous students in Canadian universities, and Indigenous education continued to be a major area of interest for me. However, with several government cutbacks at the time this dissertation was conceived, the subsequent initiative directed toward program prioritization on our campus, and the organizational anxiety related prompted me to change my course (Steeves, 2015). I found myself back in the politics of education, where I felt most at home and confident.

This new political situation on campus at the University of Saskatchewan in 2013-2014 fascinated me as an academic and as a student leader, and concerned me as a community member. I was at a university to which I held very strong ties, which made some bold decisions that resulted in chaos. The mismanagement of the process vaulted the University of Saskatchewan into international headlines and will take the institution years to recover. Relationships were spoiled and trust was shattered. How did this happen to my home?

It was fascinating to see our largely administratively run university 'devolve' into its raw political form; undergraduates were working with faculty to plan protests, the graduate students' association was embroiled in its own controversies—in which I was fully engrossed. Amidst best efforts, the political

roots of the university had sprung new growth and my focus for my research became clear to me: the university as political.

As I was contemplating the nature of universities in the contemporary day, a specific experience during my time on the students' union remained a fixture in my mind. I was frustrated by the number of times I had to explain the governance structures and organizational norms of the students' union to administrators. A lack of mutual understanding led to conflict between our groups, and hindered our ability to work collaboratively and effectively. I addressed this conflict with a presentation to a large group of administrators on who we were and how we did what we did, including perspective on our democratic roots. This presentation was one of the most effective and positive actions I took as President. Conversations were less difficult and relations were more positive after we had established a common frame of meaning and understanding.

After witnessing the trauma suffered by the university and the university community, I began to wonder if this misunderstanding of the role and purpose of the students' union was still there, and what that could mean for students' access to power and decision-making. Could this be partly why the university was in such turmoil? In the end, I want student unions and university administrators to create opportunities to work better together; positive relationships with administration enabled our Executive to accomplish a lot in a small amount of time. I want to understand the complex role and purpose of the students' union within universities, and how to position the students' union within the larger structure of the university for future inquiry. We know, aside from anecdotal evidence, next to nothing about

these organizations that have access to so many resources and senior decision makers not only within the university, but also within government and the larger community (Jones, 1995). What is a students' union, and how do we talk about them in relation to their university?

### **A Need for This Knowledge**

Almost two million students attend Canada's colleges and universities (Statistics Canada, 2013), with most these students represented by local political associations. Various known as student associations, student societies, and student government, Jones (1995) argued that students' unions exist in an "operating environment that would be the envy of many other pressure groups within the Canadian political arena" (p. 102). These organizations can have multi-million dollar annual budgets, employ dozens of permanent professional staff, own businesses, and provide important services to students like health insurance and public transportation. Many of the leaders of these students' unions hold positions within the university's governance system, creating an overlap in governance between the two organizations.

An interdependence between the university and the students' union can have positive outcomes for both parties. Universities can gain insight into the student experience and opinions from working with the students' union, and the students' union gains knowledge about university processes and policies that affect their members (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Both are also able to gain support from different groups or people in the environment for different initiatives and policies; such mutual support creates a greater sense of legitimacy for the focal

organization—in this case, the university. As students are one of the university's most important stakeholders on campus, the support of students' union elected representatives is important for crafting goals and policy (Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010).

The students' union's relationship with the university is arguably one of their most important, aside from that with their membership. They need to be able to work productively with the university and its administration for mutual benefit. They rely on the university to collect their student fees, to sanction events and ability of organizations to function on campus, and work closely with university administration on issues of concern for students. They must be able to work with the university to have influence and power over the policies and decisions that are made (Galdaskiewicz, 1985).

Through my experience within student politics, I know there is potential for productive working relationships, especially when there are mutual understandings of motivation and purpose. Research tells us organizations with similar cultures—or at least an understanding of the other's culture—work together more effectively (Beimborn, Friedrich, & Blumenber, 2009; Cannon, Doney, Mullen, & Petersen, 2010; Jim Im, 2013; Weiss, 1981; White, 2005). Common frames of reference can be built and used in communication with this mutual understanding. These structures cannot necessarily be relied on; although two partners might use the same language to describe a situation, that same language can mean different things to each partner (Bennington, Shelter, & Shaw, 2003). In effect, this relationship becomes a negotiation of a shared reality between partners; conflict occurs when there is a

disagreement of the interpretation of that shared reality (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Wilkof, Wright Brown, & Selsky, 1995). The ability to recognize differences works to make the relationship more successful for both, and being familiar with the cultures leads to a more satisfying relationship (Lee, Lee, & Kuh, 2007).

There has been limited discourse about the climate and cultures of universities in Canada, and even less about the engagement of students or their organizations in the negotiation of that culture. Historically, students and student organizations were leaders in activism and political upheaval on university campuses. Today, it seems many within the university community have become complacent about the lack of engagement by students within their academic and non-academic lives. We also know many student leaders do not report feeling valued within their institution, which helps to create a relationship with their university administration that is “strained, legalistic, and administratively focused” (Jones, 1995; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008, p. 1). Alternatively, student politics can be chaotic and dominated by student radicals and ideology, which bleeds into other parts of the university. The infamous Québec student strike saw thousands of students take to the streets to combat increases in tuition fees (Soltz, 2012).

Students’ unions themselves are sources of active conflict, which will inevitably impact the larger university community. They are routinely in court for a variety of reasons, with their sovereignty and ability to manage their own affairs generally at stake. In fall of 2016, the University of Calgary assumed control over MacEwan Hall, which had traditionally been operated by the Students’ Association

of the University of Calgary. The students' union served the University with a lawsuit contesting ownership of the building (*Students' Association of the University of Calgary v. The Governors of the University of Calgary and The University of Calgary*, 2015). The Cape Breton University Students' Union lost an appeal in February 2016 to the Canadian Federation of Students<sup>1</sup> awarding over \$500,000 in damages (*Canadian Federation of Students/Fédération canadienne des étudiant(e)s v. Cape Breton University Students' Union*, 2015). Additionally, conflict about a university's internal policy creation routinely becomes public spectacle, something the University of Saskatchewan—my alma mater—experienced during the TransformUS debacle (Sandstrom, 2016). Even though contemporary literature may have waned around student leadership inciting and sustaining conflict, the university political environment is still steeped in conflict and upheaval—perhaps of a different kind— with students' unions continuing to offer divergent views that challenge the status quo on our campuses.

For leaders—student, administration, or collegial—on our campuses to understand the context they are working within, they need a developed and clear understanding of their culture and the players active within that culture. Although the university can be studied through a political lens, there is limited attention paid to the students' union's place within that system (Baldrige, 1971). The interactions

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Federation of Students is a national federal representative organization for students from several universities and colleges across the country. Membership is determined through local referendum, with the student body represented to the CFS through their local students' union. Students are also members of respective provincial representational CFS organizations. Some provinces do not have a CFS organization due to low membership numbers or lack of will.



and conflicts these leaders have with the university community will mould and shape the attitudes and attachments of students and community members. Instead of conflict inevitably prompting negative outcomes, Tierney (2008) argued

properly informed by an awareness of culture, tough decisions may contribute to an institution's sense of purpose and identity. Moreover, to implement decisions, leaders must have a full, nuanced understanding of the organization's culture. Only then can they articulate decisions in a way that will speak to the needs of various constituencies and marshal their support. (p. 26)

Better understanding the role and purpose of the students' union within the larger social and political framework of the university will begin to give university leadership the tools to turn difficult situations into a positive community building experiences. However, as there is only dated and international information to work from, it seemed the 'world was my oyster' and I could explore this social context with a variety of tools and theoretical approaches. In pursuit of better understanding research and its role, I immersed myself in the intersections of power, culture, knowledge creation, and higher education. Chapter Two provides a substantive discussion of the outcomes of this search, which has been moulded into a robust conceptual framework for my research. The remainder of Chapter One is dedicated to detailing the foundation of this inquiry, its purpose, and basic descriptors.

## **Purpose of Study**

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide important services, including student representation within university governance structures and other supports, they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Even with the students' union's access to senior decision makers and vast organizational resources, university leadership has limited ability to make decisions inclusive of students (Tierney, 2008).

Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Browne, 2017; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the process as this dissertation research progressed:

1. How is the purpose and role of students' unions interpreted by the leaders of the students' union and their administrative counterparts in a western Canadian university?
  - How similar or different are the understandings of these groups about the purpose of students' unions in a western Canadian university?
2. How does Baldrige's (1979) conceptualization of the political university aid in constructing a theory for the students' union informed by participant's reflections on their experiences?

### **Description of Study**

This dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). The Executive Committee was the board of directors for the undergraduate students' union, and they were responsible for the overall well-being of the organization. I interviewed these four student leaders separately using semi-structured questions based on Tierney's (2008) concepts of organizational culture in higher education, with specific questions relating to the power dynamics of their relationship with the university administration.

As culture is produced and constructed by actors within the social system and expressed within a larger political framework, it is important to understand the perspective of those with whom the students' union work most closely with in the university social system (Baldrige, 1971; Berger & Luckmann, 1997; Giddens, 1984; Manicas, 2006). These student leaders provided me with names of multiple university officials with whom they worked closest, from which four university

administrators were picked to interview. These administrators were asked the same questions as the students' union to gauge their perception of the students' union's purpose and role on campus.

All interviews were transcribed and the data were coded according to thematic and eclectic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). The results of these analyses are presented in Appendices F and G at the end of this document, which were presented to the alternative group (i.e. the students' union received the results from the administration's interviews and vice versa) in modified interpretive panels for review and commentary (Noonan, 2002). In the interpretive panels, all participants were asked to illustrate the relationship of the students' union with the university. Giving participants the unstructured freedom to draw their experiences "helps to combat any preconceived biases of the researcher that might have otherwise been unintentionally imposed" (p. 378).

Lastly, observations were made in formal organizational governance meetings open to the public. Meetings of the students' union governing body, the Council of Students (COS), and the university governance body, the Senate, were attended, and minutes from other university governance meetings were reviewed for relevant data. I also reviewed every issue of an undergraduate student newspaper, and a newsletter routinely published by the administration about the campus community during the research period. A more detailed examination of the methodology and methods are presented in Chapter Three.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The following delimitations applied to this study:

1. This study focused on the perceptions of students' union Executive Committee members and their administrative counterparts on organizational culture, and on the purpose of the students' unions at a public university in Western Canada.
2. The focus was on the largest students' union on the campus, which included only undergraduate students as members.
3. Organizational culture is a large area of inquiry. This project was focused on how each group's culture framed their understanding of the students' union's purpose, and how this impacted how students access power within the larger university.
4. Data was collected in the winter and spring of 2015.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following limitations need to be taken into consideration while interpreting the results of this dissertation:

1. The participants may not be honest or sincere in sharing their perceptions. This topic can be politically sensitive, and participants may censor their voices to not offend others. Every effort was made to help participants build trust and a sense of safe with the researcher and research process.
2. Research outcomes will never be completely accurate in a positivist understanding of the world; actors are limited to knowledge gained through their lived experiences, which are inherently limited and shaped by competing ideological and political systems (Giddens, 1984).

3. There are many actors and structures within the Political University that were not consulted for this research.

This study may also be limited by the following assumptions, if incorrect:

1. Jones' description of students' unions in 1995 is still relevant at the time this dissertation was written. As a result, and consistent with other authors who have engaged the study of students' unions in Canada and the United States, students' unions are assumed to be significant political and service organizations on most university campuses in Canada (Jones, 1995; Mackey, 2006; Tierney, 2008).
2. Students' unions and the university want to work together to advance goals.
3. Students' unions and the university work in the best interests of their constituents.
4. Considering the second limitation outlined above, as reality is socially and not individually constructed, my methodology and methods are assumed to present a reality that describes the shared world of the research participants (Giddens, 1984).
5. The Executive identified administrative counterparts to include participants with the best understanding of students' unions on campus.
6. The university is comprised of multiple subcultures that organize into interest groups (Baldrige, 1971).
7. The university administration has power over the students' union's ability to conduct business.

## Definitions

**Students' Union:** the representational body for students, undergraduate or graduate, for post-secondary campuses. Generally, in Canada, these organizations levy mandatory fees on members, employ full time staff, operate services for their members, and many are registered non-profit organizations (Jones, 1995). I have chosen this term to use throughout this dissertation.

**Students' Associations/Organizations:** an umbrella term to refer to organized student involvement on campuses. It can include student clubs, students' unions, interest groups, student political lobbying groups, residence life groups, etc.

**Student Government:** the political governing organizations for students. This term is generally used more frequently in the United States (Gold & Quartroche, 1994; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008) and can refer to representational functions at the University, department, college, or institutional level.

**Student Leader:** a university student who is involved in campus life in some manner. Traditionally, student leaders have been discussed as activists, with focus on their political activities (Boren, 2001; Braga & Doyle, 1971; Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Levitt, 1984; Lipset, 1967)

**Executive Member:** a member of the Board of Directors of the students' union, which usually consists of four to five students elected through a general election once a year. In medium to large-sized students' unions, these members are generally full-time salaried employees (Jones, 1995).

**University Administration:** University Administration had no available definition in the literature or within provincial legal frameworks. For the purposes

of this dissertation, *University Administration* encompassed “members of the university’s teaching and/or professional staff who have been appointed to administrative roles at the level of department head or higher” (L. Pennock, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

**Structuration:** a theory created and popularized by Anthony Giddens (1984), an American sociologist, who believed social theory was entrenched in a division between objectivism and subjectivism. He believed social theory needed a new ontological approach to social research and this “dualism has to be reconceptualized as a duality—the duality of structure” (pp. xx-xxi). Structuration views agents not solely as interpreters of the structures that encompass their being; they are influenced, controlled, enabled by the structures that exist, and also influence these same structures. Human beings, or actors according to Giddens (1979), used these rules and resources in the “production of interaction” (p. 71), and interaction then influences the structures. As such, Giddens was clear that structures not only constrain but enable human action. He referred to this interplay as the “duality of structure” (1976, p. 161).

**The Political University:** Universities have a “complex fragmented social structure” with

divergent concerns and life styles of hundreds of miniature subcultures. These groups articulate their interests in many different ways, bringing pressure on the decision-making process from any number of angles and using power and force whenever it is available and necessary. Power and influence, once articulated, go through a complex process until policies



are shaped, reshaped, and forged out of the competing claims of multiple groups. (Baldrige, 1971, p. 20)

**Organizational Culture:** “the collective, mutually shaped patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education and which provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh, 2002, p. 25).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Having concluded the introduction, which outlined the background to the study, purpose statement, research questions, a description of the research methodology, and definitions of key terms used throughout the dissertation, I will next discuss key concepts in a review of relevant literature in Chapter Two. This literature review includes the conceptual framework for this study. Chapter Three delves deeper into the ontological and epistemological lenses, methodology, and methods used in the study. Chapter Four presents the data with analysis limited to what is and what is not included from participants. Themes are discussed in addition to word clouds compiled with participant semi-structured interviews, and drawings participants produced depicting the social reality of the university. Chapter Five provides a significant discussion of what was learned when viewed through the dissertation’s conceptual framework (Baldrige, 1971; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Chapter Six specifically answers the questions outlined in Chapter One, examines new avenues for research, provides a reflection on the research

process and conceptual framework, and concluding thoughts with references and appendices to follow.

## **Chapter 2: The Past**

Chapter one provided a general overview and outline of how this study was completed. In the proceeding literature review, I provide an overview of concepts used fulfil the purpose of this study. Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide important services, including student representation within university governance structures and other supports, they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Even with the students' union's access to senior decision makers and vast organizational resources, university leadership has limited ability to make decisions inclusive of students (Tierney, 2008). Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

### **Finding *the* Lacuna**

I began my search in the literature with a strategy focused on students' unions and student government in universities. Finding little, I expanded the search

strategy to student leaders in post-secondary education. This provided little foundation upon which to base my dissertation research, and the research that did exist was either dated or contextually too different to be of significant use. However, I included an overview of the literature to understand how students were discussed as leaders within the university, as student leaders ran the students' union. I was forced to wade deeper into the world of research and theory.

Students' unions and some sort of political analysis seemed to go hand in hand, but I did not have a way to frame an analysis. Throughout my time reading different political theories relating to organisations, I came across Giddens (1984) and his theory of structuration, which opened my mind to the larger roles and purposes of theory within research as a process. I let it guide me through my understanding of organisations and how to study them, and I eventually paired Giddens' (1984) focus on praxis and power with Habermas' (1979, 1981) intersubjective understanding of reality. There is a deeper analysis of my theoretical framework in Chapter Three of this dissertation, although the relatively unifying constructivist and social focuses of Giddens and Habermas remain a constant thread throughout the whole document.

Baldrige's (1971) conceptualization of the Political University as a complex social system comprised of different groups vying for power provided a natural vehicle to drive the research forward. However, as the model was crafted in 1971 prior to the development of contemporary Canadian students' unions, the model is incomplete. Baldrige himself conceptualized students as having "increasing influence" within the university, limited to student life and "policy formulation affecting curriculum and instruction" (1971, p. 112). Organizational culture—in

particular, the works of Schein (2010) and Tierney (2008)—was used to complete the conceptual framework to understand the negotiated reality of the political campus.

### **Student Leaders in Universities**

One of the major challenges I had with my research was the lack of a literature base upon which to build my study. A search on students' unions in Canada reveals minimal results, and those that appear are dated and significantly different in scope than this inquiry (Jones, 1995, 2002). So, I had to regroup and instead investigated how 'students' and their organizations are discussed within the literature. The content and tone of the pre-existing conversations within the community would have helped framed the larger discourse on university campuses across the world. Crafting a literature base in student affairs focused on leadership would help provide some structure through which the students' union is understood. In my experience, university administrators—especially those who work within student services—are at least familiar with academic literature related to their area of speciality. A review of how students and their organizations enabled me to not only get a sense of the professional context many of these administrators are working within, but it was a point from which to position the literature that does exist regarding students' unions.

Five main areas emerged from this search. First, universities in North America—especially in the United States—have begun to take student leadership seriously in its development through formal training programs run through the organization. This stemmed from a belief that universities should be responding to

not just the academic needs of the individual student but also the societal need for leaders (Astin, 1992; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Campus Compact, 1999). Universities here are attempting to build or grow student leaders intentionally and with specific outcomes in mind, usually related to economic or citizenship participation within greater society. Student engagement literature also focuses on student outcomes as a precursor to student success. Astin's *Theory of Involvement* (1999b), with others such as Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, et al. (1991) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), contributed to a core body of literature on the topic that discusses and tries to measure the impact of different types of engagement on the student experience and longer-term financial, professional, or political outcomes. Third, students are presented as leaders in the literature through their involvement within a university's governance structures. Rarely does this research consider student involvement in university governance within a frame that includes space for the students' union or other student organizations. Generally, students are presented as independent actors who influence or are influenced by the governance system (Bergan, 2003; Bray, 2006; Kuk, Banning, & Thomas, 2009; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008; Menon, 2003; Zhu & Ratsoy, 1999). Third, research and discussion about student activism and student politics was prolific in the 1960s and 1970s, but has since waned in popularity (Boren, 2001; Braga & Doyle, 1971; Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Levitt, 1984; Lipset, 1967; Lipset & Altbach, 1966). However, with the understanding that reality—and thus culture—is an active social negotiation, the history of student politics is important to appreciate when trying to make sense of more contemporary iterations; you can try to run away from the past, but it will

almost always catch up with you at some point. Next is an overview of the literature that deals specifically with student government. I was only able to find a few authors who examined student government and governing associations—such as the students’ union—and their conceptualization and utility of the ‘student association’ as a political or social construct was quite varied. Lastly, I will explore the nuances of the terms *student government* and *student association* in Canadian and American contexts. Canadian student services—much like the rest of Canadian culture—would have been heavily influenced by American research due to the sheer volume and access to funding for projects.

### **Student Leadership Development**

Leadership development, both within the student organizations and from a larger perspective, emerged as a theme throughout the literature on student organizations and leadership. It was largely positioned as the responsibility and purview of the university; students and their organizations were not presented as active agents within their own leadership development, and instead were recipients of a training or service intended to influence future professional, financial, and social gain. These are programs that have specific purposes within a larger refocusing of higher education on measurable outcomes outside grades in a classroom. These initiatives can be categorized into two main groups: service learning and other leadership programming.

Service learning is

a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and

reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibilities. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222)

These activities might include alternative reading weeks that are increasing in popularity in many Canadian institutions, international volunteer experiences organized through the institution, or assisting disadvantaged youth in the local community (University of Manitoba, 2013).

Institutions invest time and effort into the development of student leadership skills through formalized programs. These programs take different forms, but academics are united in the advocacy of their positive impact (Eich, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Osteen & Coburn, 2012). They believe that leadership properties can be developed through teaching students theories of leadership and offering practical experiences. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, a multi-disciplinary student affairs organization in the United States, has established standards for leadership programs. The mission of the Council was that “leadership can be learned” through educational program endeavours (CAS, 2003, p. 4). Leadership was a skill that could be learned just as any other skill, and many universities have taken this philosophy to drive leadership training.

### **Student Engagement**

Throughout the literature on student organizations, student engagement is a recurring theme. These terms encompass a variety of activities, including academic



and non-academic interaction. Astin's (1999) Theory of Involvement largely began the discussion of student involvement and articulates how student development and learning is tied to the amount of energy and time put into their education. Further, he suggested that for any learning policy to be successful, it must be tied to increased student involvement. Involvement is believed to encompass a variety of activities, including but not limited to: place of residence (commuters versus living in residence), participation in honours programs, involvement in their personal academics, interaction between students and faculty, athletics, and participation in student government.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argued that "The impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus" (p. 602), echoing the theoretical assumptions articulated by Astin (1993, 1999). Kuh's main work (1991, 2005) explored how institutions operationalize the concepts of engagement/involvement and what leads to student success. His research supported many of the same outcomes as Astin (1993, 1999) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), but he focused more on how institutions can use an understanding of involvement/engagement to achieve greater student success.

### **Student Involvement in University Governance**

Over the past few decades, students have increasingly been involved in the governance of their institutions (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999). Although there is arguably more involvement now than ever before, there are still calls to include more students in governance processes (Menon, 2003). In some instances, student

activists have reported feeling disenfranchised from participation in decision-making processes, and as a result do not view the administration as ‘collaborators’ (Jones, 1995; Menon, 2005; Roper-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005).

Love and Miller (2003) identified three rationales for student involvement in institutional governance, first as an opportunity to prepare students for their democratic role in society, second to legitimize the institution by using the student body as a sort of check and balance, and third to protect student rights. Institutions perceived as successful in student development generally institute a shared-governance model with their students (Kuh et al., 2005).

Involving students in the governance of the institution is different than involving representational student organizations such as students’ unions. Some believe the value of student government involvement in institutional governance is unknown (Laosekikan-Buggs, 2006, p. 2). A study completed at the University of Alberta found that student involvement in institutional governance was both important and effective; organized students’ unions were more effective at representing and advocating for student needs on governance bodies (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999). Although student groups were found lacking maturity in such areas as group decision-making and commitment to the mission and long-term interests of the institution, their presence on governance bodies was “deemed indispensable” (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999, p. 1).

### **Student Activism**

A rich body of literature surrounds student activism, particularly focused on the activity of the 1960s (Baldridge, 1971; Boren, 2001; Braga & Doyle, 1971;

Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Levitt, 1984; Lipset, 1967; Lipset & Altbach, 1966). The number of articles decreased in recent years as discussion about students on campuses shifted to leadership development and student success as measurable outcomes (Kuh, 1995b; Osteen & Coburn, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Regardless, activism was not the primary focus of student governments as the scant literature in Canada detailed. Student governments in Canada have arguably changed tactics from protesting in public spaces to advocating change within boardrooms (Jones, 1995, 2002). Students have represented an active and politically-charged voice on campuses for generations, and can be powerful when they organize. What is to be discussed, however, is if and how this power has transferred to the boardroom.

### **Student Government**

As stated in Chapter One of this dissertation, student government is the political governing organization for students. Its use as a phrase is largely found in sources from the United States, where student governments can have representational functions at multiple levels within the university, as well as offer support to other students' organizations (Mackey, 2006; Tierney, 2008). Even here, the amount of research found about student government as organizations was minimal to non-existent. Much of the limited conversation related to student government was found in students' affairs literature (Kuh & Lund, 1994; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008; Love & Miller, 2003; Mackey, 2006), although Kuk, Banning, and Thomas (2009) argued that student associations as a distinct entity have largely been ignored by student affairs research. Student government is often

lumped in with other student activity on campuses, and is rarely considered as a research subject on its own (Kuh, 1995b; Mackey, 2006).

Mackey (2006) argued that student governments lack “formal authority” and have difficulty establishing legitimacy within the campus community, leading questions related to the greater rationale for their existence entirely (Laosekikan-Buggs, 2006). Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggested the greatest challenge for student government is a clear role on campus and within the university. Some of these challenges might be a potential commentary on low student election turnouts (Bergan, 2003; Bok, 2006).

### **Canadian Students’ Unions**

For the function of this dissertation, students’ unions are the representational body for students, undergraduate or graduate, for post-secondary campuses. Generally, in Canada, these organizations levy mandatory fees on members, employ full time staff, operate services for their members, and many are registered non-profit organizations (Jones, 1995). To understand what students’ unions are, it may be helpful to understand them in contrast to student government in the United States. In American sources, discussions generally focused on the role of student affairs officials and the institution in the preparation of student government leaders (Bok, 2006; Gold & Quartroche, 1994; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008; Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, & Poskus, 2012). Here, student governments were not presented as having control over their own affairs as the university and student affairs personnel had ultimate authority over their activities (Bray, 2006; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008). Literature in the United States was originally framed to

primarily focus on student government, but quickly moved into a discussion of student involvement in *campus governance*—not a discussion of the systems and processes students have established to govern their own organizations (Kuh & Lund, 1994).

Research into student government or students' unions in Canada is limited at best. Jones (1995) completed the only major work on students' unions in Canada in 1995, over 20 years ago. His survey of most institutional level students' unions in Canada found every university had at least one of these institutional-level student-run organizations, which since the 1960s had held a "formal and legitimized role within the decision-making structures of the university" (p. 101). It was not unusual to have multiple students' unions serving different constituents on the same campus. For example, one university might have a students' union for undergraduate students and another for graduate students. Unlike in many student governments in the United States, membership was mandatory and the institution collected a fee from all members and released the income to the student government. This fee ranged in amount, but in 1995 averaged \$328,342 each year, which supplemented additional sources of income like businesses or service enterprises. This provided the students' union with stable funding from year-to-year. Most (80%) had paid staff, an average of seven full-time equivalents and 39 part-time staff (p. 97). Perhaps most importantly, instead of being considered under the auspice of student affairs professionals within university administration, students' unions in Canada were chartered as non-profit organizations, separated from in governance from the university (Jones, 1995; Love & Miller, 2003).

Student leaders felt their priorities were to influence and monitor university policies as well as help students find their way through the bureaucracy and red tape. They did not, however, feel they had a high level of influence over university governance (Jones, 1995). Politics was viewed to be a central role in students' unions, with most conducting some lobbying of provincial governments. However, elections for the students' unions themselves had extremely low voter turnouts (Jones, 1995). Students' unions, although involved in politics, had a much less activist nature than in earlier eras. He concluded "the board room [had] become a more accepted venue for the articulation of student interests than the university quadrangle" (p. 101).

There is no more recent research—at the time of writing—that exists to indicate the size and scope of students' unions in Canada are still as robust as Jones reported in 1995. However, there is also no research to indicate that students' unions have experienced losses regarding budget and staff capacity. This research was carried out under the assumption that students' unions continue to operate as major organizations on university campuses in Canada, as articulated in Chapter One.

## **Summary**

Much of the research has limited relevance to this study as literature relating to student leaders and organizations is primarily focused on the development of leadership skills within students and student activity as a whole. Additionally, most of the research has been conducted within the United States, which is unsuitable for this context. When student governments are addressed, they are presented as

potentially useless organizations that resemble leadership training programs more than self-governing entities engaged within decision-making of the university (Mackey, 2006). The literature presents an understanding of how student leaders are considered in relation to the university. Student leaders are discussed passively, and the literature is largely focused on student developmental outcomes. The Canadian academic community has provided a slightly stronger focus on students' unions. Over twenty years ago, Jones' (1995) showed students' unions are significant organizations that occupy a large political, service, and physical space on our campuses. This research is limited in scope and it is dated, which puts its validity in the contemporary situation into question. My professional experience and expertise gives me little doubt these organizations continue to play a large and important role on campuses, and provide a rich opportunity to expand our knowledge of the university political environment and context. The framework much of this research was based on was weak to begin with and with the limited knowledge and context we know, little faith and emphasis can be placed in its ability to support an exploration of the role and purpose of the students' union within the university. More research and exploration is needed to provide a clear picture of the political reality on university campuses.

### **Political Organizations**

Politics conjures negative images in many people's minds; it is a ruthless, dirty, and negative game played to subvert certain interests. Politicians are routinely seen as some of the least trustworthy individuals in Western society, and the term 'office politics' incites stories of backstabbing and competition (Combs & Keller, 2010;

James, 2013). Organizations are products of their environment, but politics within organizations does not have to be conceived as a negative entity. Instead, the political model sees conflict simply as a process within organizations that spurs decision-making processes (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizations are “miniature political systems” (Baldrige, 1983, p. 50); they are not simple linear entities, but instead complex systems that can be studied from multiple of angles (Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Pfeffer, 1981). The same concepts used to study political systems at the local and national levels can be applied to organizations and their decision-making processes; these are largely the same political processes, and can be discussed using the same language and ideas. Political theory has been used as a base to build a model to analyze the governance, decision-making processes, and interactions between groups in organizations; for our uses, the political organizational model provides a rich perspective on how students and their organizations access power and participate in the negotiation of culture on campus. To ignore the political is to ignore the conflict and context that drives an organization or a nation.

The political model was partially developed in response to the chaotic environment at that time on university campuses, which mirrored forces within larger society. Constraints on freedom of speech, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement all prompted people to view structures and processes within society as fragmented and conflict-based (Peterson, 2007). Universities faced mounting pressures to conform to changing ideals emerging from the social environment. The 1960s and 1970s saw access to universities expand exponentially,



as they were particularly pressured to admit more minorities (Peterson, 2007). These conflicts and new power dynamics on campuses helped generate this new organizational model, as ideals and definitions of reality were being negotiated in the open.

To begin, I want to engage with one of the more divisive concepts within our shared social spaces: organizational—or, office—politics. Pfeffer (1981) defined organizational politics that “involved those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop and use power and other resources to obtain one’s preferred outcomes in a situation where there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices” (p. 7). Actors at play within the political realm can be examined on a micro and macro scale, which encompasses individuals or larger groups. On university campuses, these groups are organized in a multitude of ways, which will be discussed in more depth later. There are several important concepts that I will explore that are identified within Pfeffer’s (1981) definition of organizational politics: networks of coalitions and interest groups, the negotiation of goals, conflict, and power. The research questions and purpose of this study has led to an in-depth examination of Baldrige’s (1971) Political University as part of the overall conceptual framework informing my research. His conceptualization of the university as a complex social system comprised of different groups vying for power has provided a natural vehicle to frame research about the role and purpose of the students’ union.

### **Core Concepts in Political Organizational Theory**

Certain markers are relatively consistent throughout political organization literature. The discussions include coalitions and interest groups involved in a

constant process of negotiation (Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Cyert & March, 1992; Lucas, 1987; Mintzberg, 1983), power (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Dahl, 1957; Pfeffer, 1981), and the normalization of conflict in every-day organizational life (Baldrige, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988; March & Simon, 1992). Taken together, these concepts paint a picture of brokerage-style relationships and structures between different policy actors within an organization. Within the duality of structure these power struggles, the resultant conflict between different interest groups and coalitions, and the resultant negotiation have a direct impact on how this political theatre develops. This negotiation of reality between individuals and groups created and influenced the cultural norms under study in this dissertation and build the structures and processes that facilitate decision-making (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Baldrige, 1971, 1983; Johnson, 2001; Lucas, 1987; Pfeffer & Salanick, 2003; Selznick, 1978).

**Negotiations and networks.** Within the political model, organizations are understood as a collection of competing groups—interest groups and coalitions—instead of a collection of individuals (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Heffron, 1989; Mintzberg, 1983; Pusser & Ordorika, 2001). Individuals within the organization are drawn to each other through common interests, values, or opposition (Baldrige, 1971). Coalitions generally have diverging interests, values, and norms, and it is very difficult to draw strict lines differentiating one from another (Baldrige, 1983; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Cyert & March, 1992; Heffron, 1989).

Goals are “a value premise—a statement of what ‘should’ be that is meant to help guide decisions” that are translated into policy and implemented, a process that is central to efficient operations and long term planning (Baldrige, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988, p. 59). Goals may not be clear, and groups within the organization do not inherently have common goals. March and Simon (1992) believed individuals have goals, while collectivities—including organizations—do not. Goals are instead crafted within organizations through a process of negotiation and bargaining, emerging from the political discourse occurring between and within the coalitions (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Cyert & March, 1992). These brokerage-style organizational politics exist because interest groups and coalitions may have differing ideas as to organizational goals or even purpose. Interest groups and coalitions “bargain among themselves to determine a certain distribution of organizational power” (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 27). The resultant hierarchy of authority is reliant on cultural and organizational norms to remain relevant and maintain their grasp on whatever power they are allocated in this bargaining process. It is through this process of discourse that the organization identifies and enacts who they are.

**Power.** Individuals within an organization must be viewed as whole beings instead of typifying them based solely on positions within an organization (Selznick, 1978). As whole beings, their relationships, in addition to their ego, are relevant to an analysis and organizational analysis becomes one of cooperative social systems understood as experiences instead of logical-rational economic systems (Baldrige, 1971; Selznick, 1978). Attention to power is central in political organizational

analysis due to this social and human element of reality (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; French & Raven, 2000; Mintzberg, 1983). Dahl (1957) provided one of the first widely recognized, albeit simplistic, definitions of power. He saw power as when “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (p. 202). Actors exercise power using resources in interactions with other actors, which is reconstituted within the duality of structure through that same interaction (Giddens, 1979). Giddens (1984) framed power as a “capability”, that is “the means of getting things done and, as such, directly implied in human action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 283). To this end there is not a singular source, but instead power arises through the multitude of interactions and negotiations that occur between interest groups and coalitions. Power serves as both a “means *for* domination, but also as the vehicle through which social actors can potentially liberate themselves from domination” (Mumby, 1987, p. 117). It is how this power is exercised that dictates organizational norms and authority structures: power, in this light, is a gatekeeper to engagement within decision-making processes.

Without power—and its accompanying legitimacy—individuals and groups are unable to participate in the larger discourse that completes the negotiation. Power can be drawn from a variety of sources. In most organizations, those who hold the purse strings have a significant source of power (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Heffron, 1989; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974). Additionally, power can come from pre-existing knowledge or access to new knowledge, formal structures entrenched in organizational policy or larger legislative frameworks, an ability to reward or

punish another and thus influence the exercise of the others power, the desire to be like those who have power, cultural and internalized values, and proximity to those who have power (Bolman & Deal, 2008; French & Raven, 2000; Heffron, 1989; Mintzberg, 1983). However, as Mintzberg (1983) argued, it is not enough simply to have power; individuals and groups must have the “will and skill” to wield power (p. 25). This can be largely temporal in nature, depending on larger normative structures to dictate what kinds of “will and skill” are necessary for successful use of power. In one environment, the ‘correct’ will and skill might be heavy-handed and authoritative; others may require a softer and more cooperative approach. The correct approach will depend on the context the actor or group is operating within. Regardless of the local culture and climate, politics develop within organizations when problems or gaps in the organization arise and peoples’ needs are not addressed (Mintzberg, 1983). People engage in political behaviour to be heard; if actors or groups lack the power to act unilaterally, they broker whatever power they possess to create conflict to needed to achieve their objectives. Conflict, then, is the driver of change and reflection.

**Conflict.** Conflict is a natural part of daily life within political organizational analysis (Baldrige, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988; Giddens, 1984; Heffron, 1989). It is a natural by-product of decision-making processes within organizations comprised of interest groups with different priorities, norms, and values contending for dominance and power. Conflict arises out of “a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision-making so that an individual or group experiences difficulty in selecting an action alternative” (March & Simon, 1992, p. 132).

Conflict exists between interest groups as they make contributions to the negotiated power hierarchy that develops within an organization. These conflict-based relationships “play a large part in determining its processes and the structuring of those processes” that exist and in this way, “organizations as constructed out of processes of conflict” (Lucas, 1987, p. 145). Conflict impacts and is impacted by rules and the distribution of resources within the duality of organizational structures (Giddens, 1979, 1984). Baldrige (1983) described the environment interest groups live within as

a state of armed coexistence. When resources are plentiful and the environment congenial, these interest groups engage in only minimal conflict. They mobilize and fight to influence decisions, however, when resources are tight, outside pressure groups attack, or other internal groups try to take over their goals. (p. 51)

This conflict is not something that necessarily requires avoidance; conflict can be an efficient tool to motivate and sustain positive large-scale organisational change.

### **The University as a Complex Social System**

Political organizational analysis requires a complex understanding of inter-group dynamics and organizational norms. Baldrige’s (1971) political model is appealing for investigating the complexity within universities. Universities themselves are interesting to study from a political standpoint as their progression has influenced the development of the theoretical base (Baldrige, 1971; Peterson, 2007). Today, universities maintain an environment of conflict and power struggles yet differ in many ways from government or corporate organizations (Baldrige,

1983; Collini, 2012). Goals are ambiguous at best as universities are comprised of multiple groups with differing values and norms, all competing for dominance (Baldrige, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988). Colleges, only one unit within the university, have been described as “a supercoalition of subcoalitions” showcasing the complexity of interactions (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 132). Moreover, universities have had a democratic history that encourages the growth of coalitions (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2006).

**The Political University.** Baldrige (1971) offered a critique on the two prevailing models at the time before explaining his political organizational model. He found the bureaucratic model had a limited focus on the informal power and processes that seemed to dominate so much of university decision-making he witnessed. Alternatively, he was unclear if the collegial model was to show *how* things operate or how they *ought* to operate. He found collegial theories to be more applicable at the department level, as it did not accurately describe what he saw that happened in high-level governance and decision-making. Last, the model did not depict conflict satisfactorily as Baldrige felt the reality was that “many decisions are not consensus but the prevalence of one group over another” (p. 14). Baldrige (1971) constructed his political organizational model to more adequately describe what he witnessed on university campuses. Change occurred at such a pace that he argued, “change is the essence of the modern university,” (p. 2) which would directly contribute to the amount of conflict inherent in the university social system.

Baldrige (1983) made a number of assumptions about the political process as he constructed his model. First he assumed that the majority of people within an

organization are not engaged within the policy making process. They generally found the process to be an “uninteresting, unrewarding activity, so they allow administrators to run the show” (p. 51). This allows a small group of elites to dictate decisions and process. When people *are* engaged in the processes they “move in and out of the decision-making process... [and] decision[s], therefore, are usually made by those who persist” (p. 51). This puts the power within the organization into the hands of an even smaller group.

Baldrige’s (1971) political model outlined a policy decision-making system with five points of analysis.

major policies commit the organization to definite goals, se the strategies for reaching those goals, and in general determine the long-range destiny of the organization. Policy decisions are not just any decisions, but they instead are those that have major impact, those that mold [sic] that organization’s future. (p. 21)

Figure 1.1 illustrates a “Simple Political Model” by Baldrige (1971, p. 22).

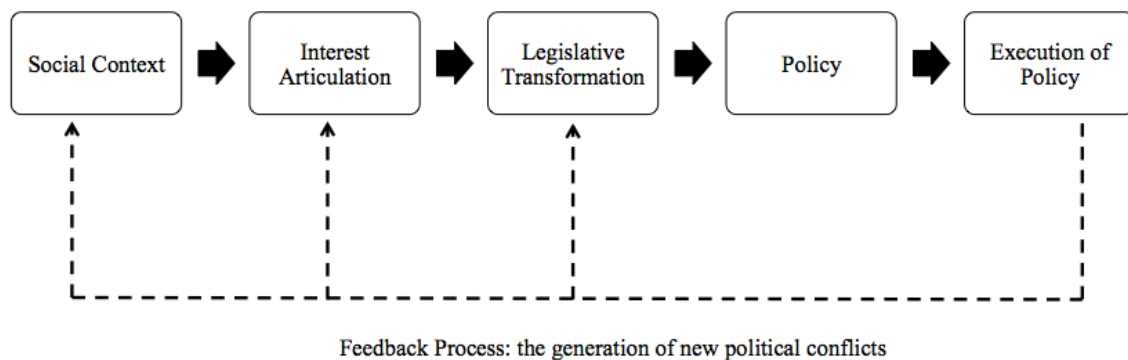
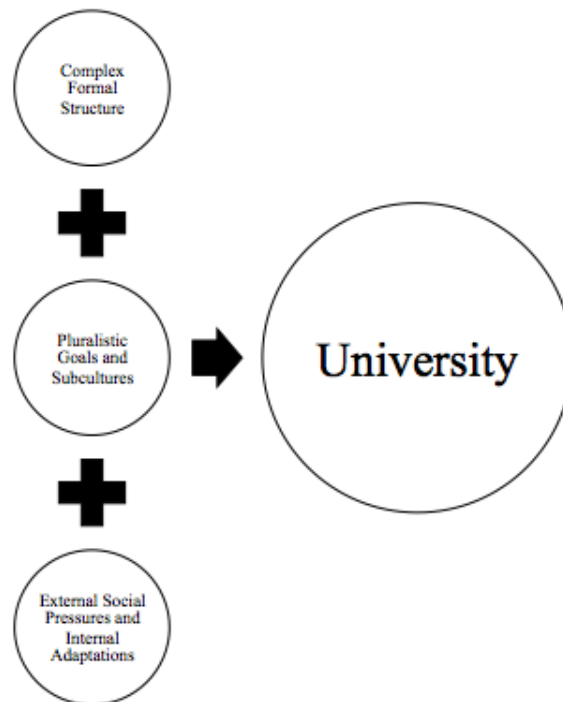


Figure 1.1. The Political Model (or Political University). Adapted from *Power and Conflict in the University* by J.V. Baldrige, 1971, p. 22. Copyright 1971 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



The first point of analysis is the *social context*, which is “a configuration of social groups with basically different life-styles and political interests” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 23). Baldrige presented the university’s social context as particularly pluralistic, creating significant potential for conflict. Groups compete through the *interest articulation process* whereby they organize to use different sources of power in an attempt to *transform legislation* in order to create *policy*. Finally, this policy is *executed* and the “resulting policy is turned over to the bureaucrats for routine execution” (p. 24). The execution of this policy can create new *feedback processes*, which creates new conflicts, and can influence the reality of the first three points of analysis. This dissertation focused primarily on the first two parts of Baldrige’s model, which are explored more in depth below.



*Figure 1.2. The Social Context within the Political Model. Adapted from Power and Conflict in the University by J.V. Baldrige, 1971, p. 106. Copyright 1971 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

***University's social context.*** There are three parts to consider in the university's social context, as shown through Figure 1.2. First, there is a *complex formal structure* within which parallel systems of authorities operate. As Figure 1.2 illustrates,

At least two authority systems seem to be built into the university's formal structure. One is the *bureaucratic* network, with formal chains of command... [and] [m]any critical decisions are made by bureaucratic officials who claim and exercise authority over given areas... The other authority system is a *professional* network, for at all levels there are formal mechanisms for bringing the expertise of the faculty into the decision-making process. (Baldrige, 1971, p. 114)

The bureaucracy gains power through formal policy: control of the budget, human resources, information, and perceived legitimacy by the community. This authority system has formally defined areas of control for different bureaucratic units within the university. Baldrige (1971) identified these areas of bureaucratic control as including trustees, central administration, college administration, departments, professors, and students as being delegated power over different areas of the university. For example, trustees are responsible for financial decisions, buildings and operations, hiring the president and top administration, and long-range planning. Professors are responsible for teaching, research and scholarly work, and student mentorship and supervision.

Alternatively, the professional authority system exists to bring faculty into the decision-making process and it draws power from "authority of expert knowledge"

(Baldrige, 1971, p. 156). This is accomplished largely through indirect faculty representative governance on “committees, councils, and the University Senate [and] exercise professional wisdom for the entire faculty” (p. 114). The professional system develops in parallel to the bureaucratic authority system and they largely mirror each other in structure and operation. For example, he positioned the University Senate as “the highest professional body in the university” that is directly comparable and in conflict with the university central administration (p. 159). Faculty can claim to have a very broad field of professional expertise, which can lead to conflict between the professional and bureaucratic authority systems. This

parallelism... ensures that professional goals will have strong advocates in the decision-making councils. Duality of authority and ambiguity of power are the price of ensuring that faculty expertise will have its say. (p. 114)

Baldrige’s (1971) model was created just as students were gaining access to university governance structures. At this point, Baldrige identified students had “[i]ncreasing influence over student activities and student life” and, “[i]ncreasing influence of policy formulation affecting curriculum and instruction” (p. 112). He did not elaborate as to what this “increasing influence” functionally includes, but argued ignoring students in policy creation is “no longer possible” due to the student activism in the 1960s. With this, any exploration

of the political dynamics of the university without the students as major political actors is simply not an adequate description... Without a doubt the future will see students assuming a larger and larger role in the

policy-forming councils of the university, and the dual parallelism that now exists between administration and faculty will be expanded to include students in significant ways. (Baldrige, 1971, p. 115)

As indicated earlier, the role of students as political actors has not been adequately addressed, limiting our ability to accurately comprehend any political engagement on university campuses.

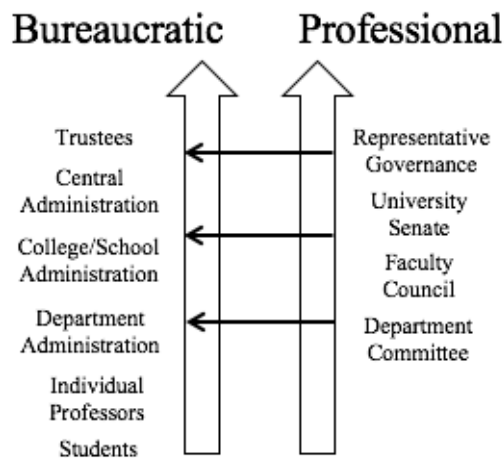


Figure 1.3. Parallel Authority Systems within the Political University. Adapted from *Power and Conflict in the University* by J.V. Baldrige, 1971.

The second part to the university's social structure is *pluralistic goals and the growth of subcultures* (Baldrige, 1971, p. 118). The university is comprised of “a system of subcultures that clusters around divergent goals” and is not identifiable as any one entity (p. 118). People and groups with common values converge to create an innumerable number of subcultures on a university campus all with potentially different priorities. As a result of this plurality

Many of the critical problems of governance are related precisely to the conflicting demands made by these groups. Because of this

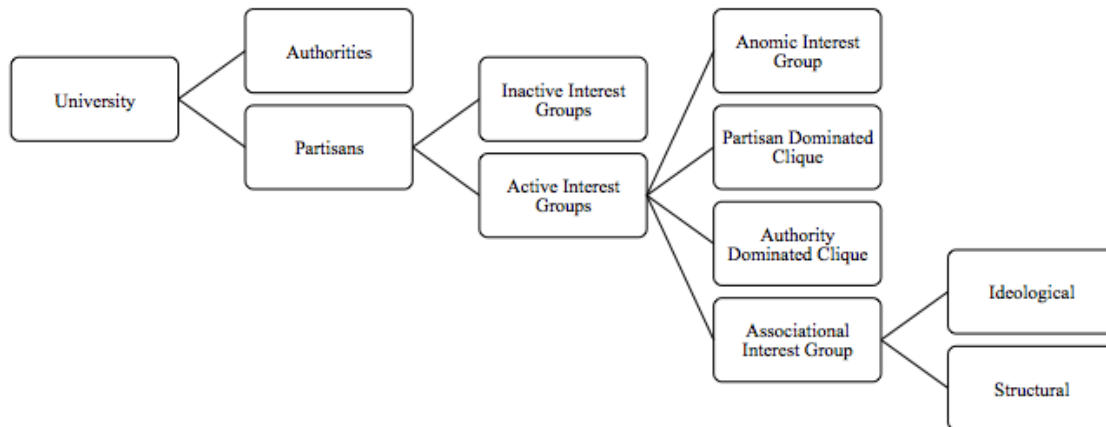
fragmentation university governance often becomes negotiation;  
strategy becomes a process of jockeying between pressure groups;  
'administration' ever more becomes 'politics' (p. 122)

Much like in other political models of analysis, power, conflict, and negotiation is core to Baldrige's (1971) analysis.

Lastly, the university has many *external social pressures* and must make *internal adaptations* as a result (Baldrige, 1971, p. 123). As the university does not operate within a vacuum it must interact with several agencies and partners within its immediate environment. Because of this necessary interaction, several influences are felt within the institution. For example, several "boundary roles" may exist whose function is to connect the university to external partners.

***Interest articulation process.*** The interest articulation process, as illustrated through Figure 1.4, involves two primary groups of actors who try to influence the policy and decision making processes within the university: partisans and authorities. Partisans are "people in the organization who are significantly affected by decisions" and seek out social influence within the university (Baldrige, 1971, p. 137). Authorities are "people in the organization who make binding decisions for the group" and are primarily interested in "the implementation of decisions and the achievement of goals" (p. 136). These two groups can overlap membership at times, as many people both impact and are impacted by the decision-making within the university (Giddens, 1984). Many partisans are not active within the social system of their university and qualify as "Quasi Groups". Baldrige conceptualized them as "*potential* partisans; they are not organized, but because they share similar

circumstances they might become active if their interests were severely threatened” (p. 139). Once these quasi groups become politicized and active, they become active interest groups.



*Figure 1.4. Partisan Groups within the Interest Articulation Process of the Political Model. Adapted from *Power and Conflict in the University* by J.V. Baldrige, 1971, p. 139-151. Copyright 1971 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

Baldrige (1971) identified four kinds of active interest groups within the university’s social structure: anomic, partisan-dominated, authority-dominated, and associational interest group. Although infrequent, Anomic interest groups arise because members feel excluded from “legitimate channels of influence” (p. 142). These groups are generally unorganized and are “characterized by spontaneous outbursts of public feeling expressed in riots and panics” (p. 141). Baldrige pointed to student protests and riots on university campuses at the time to illustrate the potential for anomic interest groups. Although similarly ideologically focused, partisan-dominated cliques are groups that are “ensuring and active but still not formally organized into associations” (p. 142). These cliques are usually formed around a common structural component, such as a college or a department, in

addition to a common ideological stance. Baldrige described the members of these groups as

coffee-break revolutionaries who pressure for a better world; they are friends who share ideas about the importance of liberal arts education and search for ways to protect it from creeping vocationalism... in short, they are the shifting, unorganized, special-interest groups that cluster around value issues. (p. 143)

Authority-dominated cliques share many of the same qualities as their partisan-dominated counterparts, but represent a vehicle authorities use to influence policy and decision making at the university. Assigning authority for a particular decision to an individual or a body can be difficult due to the complex nature of the governance and administration of a university. This can create conflict and authorities may find a need for a group to influence policy.

The last typology of active interest groups Baldrige (1971) identified was associational interest groups, who are “formally organized and continuously active... and continue to exist in spite of changing membership or goals” (pp. 145-146). Most of the people involved in these groups represent an active minority who have become active to “change conditions in the university” through influencing policy and decision making structures” (p. 147). Authority and partisan-dominated cliques can transform into associational interest groups whereby

the group is blessed with a name, officers spring up to provide stable leadership, a few rules of procedure are adopted, and perhaps it even

acquires the ultimate organizational symbol—an old hand-cranked mimeograph machine in some dusty corner. (p. 146)

Although mimeographs were abandoned as state-of-the-art technology decades ago, new technologies have emerged with similar symbolic weight, such as an organizational website or social media handle. Associational interest groups can be either structural or ideological in nature. Structural associations “are formed to protect the interests of persons located in similar life situations within the formal organizational network” (p. 146). Baldrige identified the National Student Association and the American Association of University Professors as examples, but this typology can be extended to discipline-based organizations and labour unions. Ideological associational interest groups are organized around common values or ideas such as youth wings of political parties or campus sustainability organizations.

The different active interest groups within the university are also typified by Baldrige (1971) depending on their level of trust of the authorities. Confident groups “trust the authorities and believe they are capable of executing favourable decisions” (p. 150). Neutral groups believe authorities are, as the name implies, neutral in their bias, while alienated partisans “feel that the authorities are biased against them or so ineffective that they cannot carry out favourable decisions” (p. 152). These trust levels alter how partisans react to authorities, helping them choose between the different tools of power at their disposal.

*Partisan power articulation.* Partisans draw their power from four interconnected “bases”: bureaucratic, professional, coercive, and personal (Baldrige, 1971, p. 154). It is important to understand these sources of power and



not necessarily absolute; limitations on power exist and depend on any number of variables as in any other setting.

As discussed above, the *bureaucratic* power base stems from the “formal arrangements of the organization” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 154). *Professionals* receive their power “based on the authority of expert knowledge... that others lack and other groups allow this influence because they believe that the partisans have information they lack” and exercised through faculty representative governance structures (p. 156). However, there are many partisans on university campuses that do not have access to professional or bureaucratic power structures. Some of these partisans turn to *coercive* tactics to “protect their interests” such as disrupting university business through protests or strikes, acting irrational or *crazy* to upset the *natural* order, or appealing to public opinion (p. 161). It is important to understand these partisans feel alienated from the system of legitimate power, and turn to these outside tactics because they do not have trust or faith in existing structures to adequately represent their needs and views.

Lastly, Baldrige (1971) pointed to the “elusive quality known as ‘leadership’” as an important *personal* power resource for partisans. While he did not go into depth into what this means and how partisans use the personality of those at the forefront of their groups, he argued that both “partisan and authority groups alike are dependant on the personal skills and qualities of their members” (p. 163).

**Students and students’ unions within the Political University.** While students are featured to some degree within Baldrige’s (1971) model, he was quick to acknowledge there were shortcomings. At the time his model was created,

students had limited authority and representation on university campuses, as seen in Figure 1.3. Largely due to the student activism and protest of the 1960s, students received access to university governance structures. By 1971, students began to secure seats within university governance structures, but it was a work in progress with questionable outcomes. Prior to this point, students were “silent partners in academic life,” and Baldrige predicted they would be included within the university social system as a third parallel authority structure (Baldrige, 1971; Tierney, 2008, p. 148). Baldrige (1971) hypothesized that

[w]ithout a doubt the future will see students assuming a larger and larger role in the policy-forming councils of the university, and the dual parallelism that not exists between administration and faculty will be expanded to include students in significant ways. (p. 115)

Baldrige’s model does not formally make room for students or their organizations in the professional authority system. These representative bodies are intended to integrate faculty in meaningful ways into the decision-making process. As we know from the discussion earlier about students and university governance, students and/or students’ unions have been integrated into these bodies in the professional network (Jones, 1995; Zhu & Ratson, 1999). The model primarily characterizes students as alienated partisans who lead in the use of coercive tactics on campus due to their inability to access bureaucratic or professional power resources.

The student body itself can be broken into subcultures much in the same way as faculty and other partisans in the university. Baldrige borrowed Clark and Trow’s typology of student subcultures, which separates students into four general

categories, namely, Collegiate, Academic, Vocational, and Non-Conformist (as cited in Baldrige, 1971, p. 64). The collegiate subculture grew out of traditional college life, centered on the social aspects of university life including collegial sports teams and events. The academic subculture is quite self-explanatory, with these students primarily focused on their studies and achieving high academic achievement. The vocational subculture “fosters the serious pursuit of job preparation. It is a no-nonsense orientation, with little time for leisurely contemplation of ideas or the social round of Joe College” (Clark & Trow, as cited in Baldrige, 1971, p. 65). Lastly, the nonconformist subculture “is a commitment to serious pursuit of ideas, as in the academic orientation, but with off-campus groups as main points of reference” (Clark & Trow, as cited in Baldrige, 1971, p. 66). These different student subcultures could hypothetically become engaged in different partisan interest groups, although Baldrige’s discussion of students within the interest articulation process was regulated to revolts and alienated partisans. As students’ unions did not exist in 1971 as we know them now, it is difficult to hypothesize how they would be integrated into Baldrige’s model.

## **Summary**

At its core, politics encompasses the distribution of scarce resources. Power structures and conflict between competing interests are present in every human institution, and organisations like a university are no different. But, you cannot divorce politics from context, and Baldrige argued that “an adequate conceptualization of university ‘politics’ depends on an adequate grasp of the university’s ‘social structure’” which is comprised of its formal systems, subcultures,

and external environment (Baldrige, 1971, p. 105). Any attempt to make room within Baldrige's model for the contemporary Canadian incarnation of the students' unions must include all three. The students' unions role within formal structures has been researched more extensively than their role within the cultural arena as a player with divergent and pluralistic goals. To take the analysis one step further, there was limited discussion in research or literature about if the students' union can be and should be considered as part of the external environment the university due to their unique political and representative mandate. Considering the centrality of subcultures and their pluralistic goals to the political model, I decided it would provide a convenient access point through which to answer my questions about the role and purpose of the students' union and how to position them within Baldrige's (1971) model.

### **Organizational Culture**

Culture is comprised of the shared norms and values of an organization. Deal and Kennedy (1982) thought of organizational culture as simply "the way we do things" (p. 4). Schein (2010) expanded upon this base and presented organizational culture as

a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

Culture becomes known on an emotional level once an individual has been socialized into the greater organizational milieu. Schein's (2010) approach to studying organizational culture developed mainly from observations of corporate organizations, how they operate, and the application of an anthropological lens. Within his model, there are three levels to organizational culture: artefacts, espoused beliefs and values, and "basic underlying assumptions," which are the organization's "[u]nconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values" (p. 24). These are differentiated from an organization's stated beliefs and values. Bolman and Deal (2008) argued "[t]he values that count are those an organization lives, regardless of what it articulates in mission statements or formal documents" (p. 255). The espoused and the enacted mission must be considered in tandem to determine which norms and values are inherent within the organizational culture (Schein, 2010). However, the realm of organizational culture is vast. This is neither a complete nor an all-encompassing review of literature and research related to organizational culture. Instead, an effort was made to judiciously choose literature directly relevant to this study.

### **Organizational Culture in Higher Education**

Relatively few discussions of values and norms within institutions of higher education appear within the literature (Mueller, 2013). The study of organization culture in higher education is in its infancy with most research produced in the past 20 years (Manning, 2013; Menon, 2003; Tierney, 2008). A usable definition of organizational culture appropriate to the higher education context has "remained

elusive,” however, much of what has been written falls in line with what has been presented above (Tierney, 2008, p. 27).

Kuh (2002) defined organizational culture in a higher education setting as the collective, mutually shaped patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education and which provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus. (p. 25)

Broadly speaking, culture provides “lenses through which its members interpret and assign value to the various events and products of this world” (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008, p. 10). Culture within universities has been presented as “both a process and a product” shaped by the interaction of actors within the university and with actors off campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. iv). Through studying culture, and the values and norms inherent within the culture, we come to understand how individuals operate on a daily basis. Many cultures may exist within a single university, with different norms and values inherent to each vying for dominance (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008).

Tierney (2008) identified six elements to organizational culture that are “essential concepts to be studied at a college or university” (pp. 29-30): environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. Table 1 is a reproduction of these elements alongside the questions Tierney (2008) proposed.

Together, these elements provide a structured framework through which perspectives on culture can be examined.

**Table 1**  
***Tierney's (2008, p. 30) Framework of Organizational Culture***

<b>Element</b>	<b>Means of Inquiry</b>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the organization define its environment?</li> <li>• What is the attitude toward the environment? (Hostility? Friendship?)</li> </ul>
Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is it defined?</li> <li>• How is it articulated?</li> <li>• Is it used as a basis for decisions?</li> <li>• How much agreement is there?</li> </ul>
Socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do new members become socialized?</li> <li>• How is it articulated?</li> <li>• What do we need to know to survive/excel in this organization?</li> </ul>
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What constitutes information?</li> <li>• Who has it?</li> <li>• How is it disseminated?</li> </ul>
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are decisions arrived at?</li> <li>• Which strategy is used?</li> <li>• Who makes decisions?</li> <li>• What is the penalty for bad decisions?</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the organization expect from its leaders?</li> <li>• Who are the leaders?</li> <li>• Are there formal and informal leaders?</li> </ul>

### **Culture and the Political Model**

Organizational theory largely separates culture and politics into different models with different theoretical bases and assumptions (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Bolman & Deal, 2008). However, these two concepts are interrelated and impact the others expression within an organization. Organizations are social systems that encompass individuals and groups who share “norms, values, and expectations” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 181).

Viewed through a political lens, organizational culture is a product of negotiation between groups who use power to navigate conflict to dominate organizational life. Culture is a result of “the interaction of the behaviour of all the organization’s stakeholders from the beginning of its history up to a particular point in time” (Mitroff, 1983, p. 38). More specifically, through organizing, coalitions and interest groups create “a common set of norms governing the group’s behaviour” in addition to symbols and “common *life-styles*” that establish “similar habits, modes of action, thought patters, and definitions of the world” (Baldridge, 1971, p. 140). Individuals with similar values will be more likely to form coalitions and stay together when faced with conflict (Galdaskiewicz, 1985). Lucas (1988) argued, “it is important to define the political aspects of organizational culture” (p. 144) since the organization is comprised of these subcultures represented in the different interest groups and coalitions. He relied on research by Strauss et al. (1963) who found that structure within an organization was a product of negotiation from conflict resulting from relationships between subgroups. Lucas (1987) thus saw “organizations as constructed out of processes of conflict” (p. 145) between groups that have defined themselves in terms of shared values and beliefs. A political and cultural approach builds on these foundations, seeing organizations as constructed out of processes of conflict:

Culture emerges out of interactions between interest groups as they define the meaning of, and then act upon, specific organizational issues such as budgets, strategic plans, plant acquisitions, or manpower policies. (Lucas, 1987, p. 145)



Interest groups jockey for dominance through these interactions within the organization to mould it in their image and with their values (DuBrin, 2009; Giddens, 1984; Lucas, 1987). Whether these groups are successful or not depends on their access to power within decision-making structures. Actors use power that has been institutionalized by norms and values within the organization to legitimize and rationalize courses of action (Baldrige, 1971; DuBrin, 2009; Lucas, 1987; Pfeffer, 1981). The culture that comes from this negotiated order dictates who will be dominant in decision-making processes, which groups have more legitimacy within the system, and how power is distributed. As culture is being produced through a process of competition and negotiation, dominant and oppressed subcultures exist who use several frames of reference to understand the larger culture (Giddens, 1979). If subcultures do not share the social norms, values, or expectations, working relationships are more difficult to actualize creating the potential for more conflict to enter the system (Beimborn, Friedrich, & Blumenber, 2009; Jin Im, 2013).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Baldrige's (1971) conceptualization of the university as a complex social system comprised of different groups vying for power provided a natural vehicle to drive the research forward. However, as the model was crafted in 1971 prior to the development of contemporary Canadian students' unions, the model is incomplete and needs amendment. Baldrige (1971) argued that "an adequate conceptualization of university 'politics' depends on an adequate grasp of the university's 'social structure'" that is comprised of its formal systems, subcultures, and external environment (p. 105). Any attempt to make room within Baldrige's

model for the contemporary Canadian incarnation of the students' unions must include all three. The students' unions role within formal structures has been researched more extensively than their role within the cultural arena as a player with divergent and pluralistic goals. Organizational culture was used as a convenient access point through which to answer the research questions about the role and purpose of the students' union and how to position them within Baldrige's (1971) model. Organizational culture brings a human element and the intersubjective needed to understand into a political system defined by power struggles and conflict. Schein's three levels of cultural analysis and Tierney's (2008) concepts in organizational culture in higher education, with attention paid to the role of power, conflict, and negotiation were used to supplement Baldrige's political model to create a more holistic framework for analysis.

### **Chapter 3: The Plan**

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide important services, including student representation within university governance structures, they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010). Students largely gained their inclusion in university governance bodies in the 1960s and 1970s during periods of political unrest on North American campuses. Tierney (2008) questioned the integrity of the process, and the basis upon which our research in academic governance in North America is conducted. He argued that

the point was to add a student or two to a committee, not to give the students a structural voice akin to a faculty senate. Two points are worth mentioning here. First, one ought not to overlook how Americentric the research has been on academic governance. If one looks abroad to either Latin America or Europe, there is a long tradition of including students in the governance processes of the institution. My suggestion is not to argue that students should be included in governance in one way or another, but that, within the United States, researchers have constructed governance processes in a particular way that more closely resemble corporate models of governance rather than those founded on principles of communality... My second point, then, is that over the last generation there has been considerable discussion about the nature of inquiry. Broadly stated, history pertained to analyses of great men, not women, and minorities seemed not to exist if one were to read about any number

of components of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. My concern is similar when we look at the research on governance in higher education. If one is to look at such research, one needs to consider what exists, but also what—and who—is absent. Such a suggestion points to the theoretical frameworks upon which the research rest. (pp. 148-149)

In Chapter Two, I outlined how this research will fill a void within the literature; not only is the greater North American research world “Americentric” (p. 148) in general, but also specifically within Canada. a

Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students’ union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). This chapter provides detail on the ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods used to answer the research questions presented in Chapter One.

### **A Critical and Constructivist Theoretical Framework**

Structures, including culture, cannot be studied directly (Calhoun et al., 2007; Giddens, 1984; Tierney, 2008). As such, indirect approaches to examine “streams of

action” must be used to enable elucidation of structures for analysis (Calhoun et al., 2007, p. 221). Exploration of the ontological and epistemological bases of this dissertation’s conceptual framework produced a clear theoretical framework within which this study was structured. Elements from both constructivism and critical theory were used to create a critical and constructivist theoretical framework. I primarily draw upon the writing of two theorists: Habermas (1979, 1981) and Giddens (1984), and other valuable analyses of their work (Berger & Luckmann, 1997; Browne, 2017; Hurwoth, 2005; Manicas, 2006).

Critical theory and constructivism developed as social inquiry began to reject the dominant positivist paradigm. Theorists adopted methods more—but not exclusively—qualitative and social in nature and critically explored the rationality of modernity (Habermas, 1979; Manicas, 2006). As critical theory and constructivism are not a unified theory, there are different interpretations of each independent of the other. I brought them together for my theoretical framework to capture critical theory’s emphasis on power and social relations, and constructivism’s positioning of reality as a subjective experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1997; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). These are encompassed within Habermas’ (1979, 1981) intersubjective communicative reality and Giddens’ (1984) emphasis on power and space-time as critical variables in the construction of reality. Both critical theory and constructivism operate under the assumption objectivity is not possible within the research and inquiry process (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). Understanding the why and how things come to be replaces explanation as the end goal for research (Berger & Luckmann, 1997; Manicas, 2006).

This opens the door to a more holistic approach to research, with understanding and the need for interpretation of experiences through reflection central to the approach. Within this critical and constructivist framework, a researcher looks to explain the process that produces the outcomes of experience, and not aim to predict or control outcomes. The university is a complex space where the division between politics and inquiry can be difficult to draw.

Chapter Two outlined the conceptual framework that guides this research, and it is positioned within a critical and constructivist theoretical framework. Luckily, my conceptual framework is primarily based on Baldrige and Tierney, who center their writings in a similar epistemological and ontological condition (Baldrige, 1971, 1983; Tierney, 1988; 2008). Culture is a negotiated product within social systems where power has the capability to dictate norms, processes, and access (Baldrige, 1971, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Manicas, 2006; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). The rest of this section will provide an overview of the core tenets of Giddens' and Habermas' view of social systems. After exploring both theorists separately, I draw upon both in creating my own critical and constructivist ontological and epistemological theoretical framework.

### **Giddens' Structuration Theory**

Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984) believed social theory was entrenched in a division between objectivism and subjectivism, and it needed a new ontological approach to social research as "dualism has to be reconceptualised as a duality—the duality of structure" (pp. xx-xxi). Giddens argued that agents are not solely interpreters of the structures that encompass their being; they are influenced,

controlled, enabled by the structures that exist, and influence these same structures simultaneously. These structures include things like capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism; they represent oppressive power forces in action at a specific space-time. Actors and groups may not be fully aware of the influence of larger power structures, but it is pervasive.

The term 'structure' is used in a variety of ways in the academic community to describe organizations and processes. Within structuration, structures are defined as rules and resources that "act as common interpretive schemes in a particular social system" (Calhoun et al., 2007, p. 221). Giddens (1984) defined rules as the "techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices" (p. 21). Rules cannot be written or spoken, as the act of transferring the rules into language is an interpretation; rules exist as a virtual structure within society and organizations. For example, laws and court decisions are the interpretation of rules, but are not in themselves rules. Actors need to be aware of these rules to be knowledgeable about their social system, which helps to construct frames of reference to apply to the environment around them. Resources are conceptualized as two separate kinds: authoritative, which "derive from the coordination of the activity of human agents," and the ability to control, or 'allocate', material based resources (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxi). Actors use these rules and resources in the "production of interaction" which then influences the overall structures of the organization (Giddens, 1979, p. 71). Structures are not only constraining on human action, but also enabling. Giddens referred to this interplay as the "duality of structure" (1976, p. 161).

Systems are “[r]eproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practices” (Giddens, 1979, p. 25). Through the utility and reproduction of structures, “recurrent social practices” form common frames of meaning that are then used to interpret the world (pp. 65-66). There can be a multitude of systems, and institutions are viewed as the “most deeply-layered” systems in social analysis (p. 65). As such, structures and systems are ever changing, making the concepts of temporality and place of utmost importance. The existence of structure in a specific time and place allows systems to be conceptualized and studied; structural properties “bind” time and space together to allow for generalizations and consistency. Systems, as a result, exist only in the specific time and space that actors use social practices to reproduce structural properties (Giddens, 1984, p. 17).

Structure acts to constrain or enable action from human beings. Actors within these systems are not autonomous; their agency is “bounded” by the structures their actions serve to reproduce (Giddens, 1976, p. 160). The actions of actors are also the product of and exist to support larger oppressive forces expressed through power. Actors exercise power using resources in interactions with other actors, which is reconstituted within the duality of structure through that same interaction (Giddens, 1979). Giddens (1984) framed power as a “capability”, that is “the means of getting things done and, as such, directly implied in human action” (p. 283). To this end there is not a singular source, but instead power arises through the multitude of interactions and negotiations that occur between interest groups and coalitions. These forces need to be taken into consideration within the space-time they occur,



as reality is a fluid concept that is ultimately undefinable; all we can hope to do is grasp a sliver of what is truth.

### **Habermas' Communicative Action**

Habermas (1979, 1981) built his model of social action and social systems based on a reaction to contemporary dialogues of rationality, and how rationality plays a part in the construction of reality. He argued for an understanding of communicative rationality that exists in the intersubjective relationships between people. Reality and rationality is, then, ultimately a social process. People build reality together in a space between what he called the Lifeworld and the System. The lifeworld is comprised of lived experiences, and the system represents larger forces at play that structure our world like capitalism or democracy. Habermas took inspiration from the linguistic turn in critical theory, and viewed language as the basic building blocks of our shared reality. Language orders the reality that we see, and reality itself is an individual experience expressed through every day routines. He saw language as subject to influence and interpretation as it is itself a socially constructed entity. However, language is ultimately flawed and unable to accurately describe reality as it is grounded in the common experiences of society and not the individual, and misinterpretation can easily occur (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Habermas, 1979). Language is shaped by the System as well, which encompasses and actively expresses oppression. As such, language is by its nature an oppressive system that presents a flawed understanding of our shared reality; but, it's the tool we have at our disposal to investigate these phenomena.

## **A Personal Theoretical Framework**

Habermas (1979, 1981) and Giddens (1976, 1984) argued many of the same positions in relation to reality and how it is understood; they diverge in their approach to the problem of reality and how it is constructed. While an entire book can—and has—been written comparing their conceptualizations of praxis and modernity, I do not wish to claim that level of complete understanding or mastery of this segment of philosophy (Browne, 2017). Rather, what I here do is explain how Habermas and Giddens influenced by understanding of reality and how I applied this understanding to my research. I am also blessed by the attention both Tierney and Baldrige paid to their epistemological and ontological motivations, who are also built into this theoretical framework. So, here I outline my understanding of the nature of reality—ontology—and how I can investigate that reality as a researcher—epistemology.

### **Nature of Reality**

Reality is messy; it is “socially constructed, filled with multiple meanings and interpretations, and that emotions are involved” (Hurwoth, 2005, pp. 210-211). Human beings, or actors, construct reality through experiences in everyday life and in their interactions with other actors (Bakker, 2010; Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Habermas, 1979; Horkheimer & Adorono, 1972). Reality is inherently subjective and beyond the reach of current scientific methods to completely replicate. It is akin to ‘grey mush,’ with language serving as an imperfect and fuzzily defined container—an infinite number of constantly changing containers—holding some of that grey mush to make social interaction possible.

However, multiple forms and sources of power exist that “to shape the oppressive and productive nature of the human tradition” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 439). Culture serves as an arena where privileged and subservient groups compete to control how knowledge is formed and distributed, thus controlling the actions and beliefs of those subservient. Educational institutions are particularly important to educational critical theorists as “educational organizations, above all, are committed to the maintenance, transmission and recreation of culture. Culture is, in fact, the prime resource of educational practice” (p. 9). They argued that these groups “deploy differing systems of meaning based on the forms of knowledge produced in their cultural domain” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 441). Social interaction both defines and reinforces the status quo, including oppressive power structures.

### **Research and ‘Knowledgeability’**

The researcher seeks to interpret the meaning of social action by investigating the meaning actors attach to their action; they seek *verstehen*, or to understand the understanding (Hurwath, 2005; Schwandt, 2003). Actors within an organization are knowledgeable of their actions, but they may be unable to verbalize their routines and actions until asked, but the actions themselves may be autonomous (Giddens, 1984). Critical theorists argued people are not necessarily aware of their actions, while interpretivists argued people can interpret and understand their actions if they have enough of a common language (Bakker, 2010; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Howe, 2000).

Actors possess “knowledgeability... carried in practical consciousness” (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiii). An actor’s practical consciousness encompasses their

knowledge of everyday life, which is routinized and not necessarily at the forefront of their awareness of self. People only think about this behaviour or describe it when they are asked to explain it to an outsider; it is inherently a reflective process. To Giddens (1984), these routinized practices are the “prime expression of the duality of structure in respect of the continuity of social life” (p. 282). These actions—and the reflection on practice by agents—can be observed and explored.

Human knowledge and their frames of reference are subjective, and as such the researcher must become integrated into the research process to decipher actor’s knowledge (Giddens, 1976; Habermas, 1979). Giddens (1984) suggested the researcher immerse themselves in the social system to gain ‘entry’ to the social system, find out what the individuals know, and consider the daily activities. He called this exchange the “double hermeneutic” as the researcher is translating the actor’s interpretations of their frames of meaning (p. 284). Giddens (1979, 1984) argued people are not always aware of their day-to-day conduct and thus the researcher needs to become able to understand the frames of meaning in an intimate manner, including the different systems of power that are simultaneously influencing action. I am a uniquely positioned individual; there are few former student politicians who go on to study and understand the world they were trying to operate within.

Giddens (1976) believed researchers could draw upon their own knowledge and frames of reference as a resource to interpret the social interaction in a system. As the researcher filters the interpretation through their own unique lens they hold a certain bias; this is a fact of social research and cannot be mediated. Objectivity is

impossible within social research, as society is rife with injustice, hegemony and domination are normative, with social and normative historical forces controlling actors (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Howe, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). Hurwoth (2005) took this one step further and argued that within social research “there is no separation between the evaluator and those evaluated” (p. 211). The role of values and emotions within the research process is embraced within the critical theorist community, and Habermas urged people to self-reflect on interests and values, as “we can become aware of it, take account of it, and even compensate for it” (Howe, 2000, p. 10).

In Chapter 1, I discussed my journey as a student and how I came to my area of research interest. Here, I discuss briefly how my experiences may influence this dissertation for the reader’s consideration. In the arena of research into student politics I am both an insider and an outsider, which the concepts of *emic* and *etic* encompass (Harris, 1976). As one who has lived the experience of being an elected student leader, I have an intimate understanding of universities and students’ unions and how they operate, and how I believe they ought to operate. This in conjunction with my past studies in political science has led me to develop preconceptions that may have a role in the research journey. This puts me in the position, to a certain degree, of an insider within the social research. Here, I am participating in the research in an emic capacity. This past could not only colour how I write and conduct my research, but may have an impact on the relationships I develop with both the students’ unions’ Executives and their administrative counterparts. I also will be an outsider to the organization and in an etic position.

As such, I may find myself needing to craft new frames of meaning to interpret and understand how different campuses operate. Both of these positions present challenges and opportunities for me as a researcher to overcome and embrace. However, having the reader understand and appreciate my mindset and how it may influence the research is of utmost importance, particularly considering the critical interpretivist framework for this study.

Lastly, research must have a transformative aspect within a critical interpretivist theoretical framework; it requires a larger social purpose, an understanding of how the research will be useful in our society, recognition of the power dynamics inherent in the system under study, and an understanding of the role of legitimacy within organizational decision making. Research and knowledge itself is power, with hegemony alive in the production of knowledge, and that dynamic and impact needs to be constantly in the mind of the researcher (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). As Habermas posited (1979), researchers and individuals must practice self-reflection to maintain awareness of how their values and emotions are influencing thought and research: that is a task I strive to imperfectly accomplish here.

### **Methodology: Case Study**

Baldrige (1971) argued, “the real value of a case study is to provoke ideas about a new way of viewing the world, to fill in an idea with vivid detail, or to suggest new perspectives” (p. 33). Chapter one outlined the limited available research about students and their unions within the social structure of their university. As such, a methodology that enabled flexibility and holistic thinking was

necessary to answer the research questions. Case studies are a common tool in organizational political and cultural research due to their holistic approach to data collection and ability to construct rich understandings (Baldrige, 1971; Cameron, 2006; Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Manning, 2013; Melewar & Akel, 2005; Tierney, 2008). They enable researchers “to grasp the totality of a situation or process” (Bakker, 2010, p. 3). Yin (2009) described a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). Clyde Mitchell (1983) suggested case studies had an “explicit end in view of drawing theoretical conclusions” (p. 191).

**This case study.** This study was constructed as an exploratory case study, which allowed for significant flexibility throughout the research process (Baldrige, 1971; Timmons & Cairns, 2010). It followed Yin’s (2009) methodology, and focused on a students’ union and a university in Western Canada. The framing of this case study has been intentionally left vague to better protect participant anonymity; there are a limited number of universities in Western Canada. This was a concern for some potential research participants who ultimately declined participation. It was important to maintain an open mind in data collection and analysis, for, as life is messy, so can be research. As researcher, I allowed the research design to grow and adapt as time dictated.

**Methods.** One of the benefits of a case study methodology is the wide selection of methods that can be used in investigation. This case study used semi-structure interviews, modified interpretive panels, drawings, and ethnographic and observation methods for data collection. Each is considered theoretically and

practically in depth below. In qualitative and ethnographic research, the researcher must remain flexible and responsive to the environment in which data is collected (Timmons & Cairns, 2010). As such, minor deviations from the original research design were necessitated and resulting in richer data. Each change is outlined below within its respective section.

*Semi-structured interviews.* Interviews have been called “part and parcel of our society and culture” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 11). They enable a conversation between researcher and the actor, leading to a “production of meaning” (p. 14) of interpretations of experiences much deeper than other non-personal forms of data collection (Warren, 2002). Although research literature guides the development of appropriate frames to conduct research, Warren (2002) cautioned against letting research literature confine the development of the interview after the primary steps (p. 85); the researcher should maintain flexibility and openness throughout the interview. As a result, the prepared questions were left intentionally vague to facilitate a conversation between the participant and myself. Interview questions were adapted from Tierney’s (2008) elements of organizational culture in higher education as modeled in Table 1, and are presented in Appendix F at the end of this dissertation.

A total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with four undergraduate students’ union Executive members—undergraduate students themselves—and four university administrators as participants. The students’ union Executive was chosen as a purposeful sample due to the high level of knowledge about the students’ union within the social structure of the university



and were initially contacted through the introductory letter as presented in Appendix A (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The research site had an undergraduate students' union and a graduate students' union. A decision was made to focus on the undergraduate students' union due to differences in mandate, size, and scope of the organizations. The two students' unions were potentially too different to provide a deeper understanding of relationships; it was outside of the mandate of this research to conduct a comparison of students' unions. The undergraduate participants were interviewed in the last four months of their terms in office; it was at that time they would have the most capacity to reflect on their experiences while still firmly in office as Executives. The terms for this students' union ran from May to April, with elections held around February or March. I completed the interviews prior to their successors taking office, so the participants were still actively involved in decision-making at the university at the time of interview.

Administrative participants were selected through engagement with the students' union executive participants. I asked the students' union executive members to identify four to five members of the university administration with whom they worked regularly. These administrators represented multiple administrative departments on campus, and were at a variety of seniority levels. The timing of these interviews was less important than for the students' union Executive as the administrators were permanent employees. I then contacted several those administrators through the same introductory letter presented in Appendix A. Using a pool of potential administrative participants protected anonymity and ensured a sufficient number of potential participants. All participants completed

the Participant Consent Form in Appendix B prior to the interviews. The eight individual interviews were conducted between January and March 2015, with transcripts returned to participants for approval by the end of March and were returned with the Data/Transcript Release Form in Appendix C. The interviews themselves were conducted in the office of the participant, and were audio recorded with an iPad application called Voice Record and a digital recorder.

*Modified interpretive panels.* Actors within a culture are the experts, knowingly or not, of that culture (Habermas, 1979; Giddens, 1984). As a researcher, my role is to create a research design that best captures the understandings of my participants, and present a case study that accurately reflects their intentions and knowledge (Baldrige, 1971; Habermas, 1979). Interpretive panels are focus groups used in a non-conventional manner. Noonan (2002) differentiated between focus groups and interpretive panels in this way:

First, focus groups are used to collect data; interpretation panels are used to interpret the results of qualitative data analysis. Second, focus groups are often composed of randomly selected individuals who possess specific knowledge that the researcher needs; interpretation panels are always purposely selected from participants within a study. Third, focus groups may produce data that may be conflicting... whereas interpretation panels attempt...to reach consensus. (p. 92)

The interactions actors may have and the knowledge they create together must be interpreted through the frames of meaning of the actors themselves (Giddens, 1976).

This method enables the researcher to include a perspective they do not possess

within the data analysis process, effectively gaining “the actors’ interpretations of the web [of culture] itself” (Tierney, 2008, p. 25).

Organizations are constructed by the actions and meanings of the many actors within their social structures, and those actors are in the best position to provide interpretation of analysis. However, culture is a negotiated concept within an organization, which necessitated a more holistic approach than the traditional interpretive panel could provide (Baldrige, 1971; Lucas, 1987). As such, Noonan’s (2002) interpretive panels were modified to capture multiple perspectives and a unique approach to account for hegemony. The students’ union executive does not solely craft their purpose and role with the social structures of the university. The university, and in particular the administration of the university are commonly conceptualized within higher education literature as possessing a great deal of power within the institution. It would then have a disproportionate impact on the role and purpose of the student’s union within the university’s social structure (Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Habermas, 1979). Asking participants to interpret their own data analyses may have enabled a deeper understanding of each set of data, but I asked both groups of participants to interpret the other group’s set of data (i.e. the Executive received the results from the administration’s interviews and vice versa), using the Appendix G as a guide. This provided an unique and rich perspective on the social structure and power dynamics of the university that could not have been achieved any other way.

Word clouds were used as a tool to spur conversation about the other groups data. Selections from interview transcripts describing these concepts were pooled,

and the results were used to create the word clouds that are replicated in Appendix I. Adjustments were made to combine similar words (for example, 'students' and 'student'), and remove filler words (for example, 'of' and 'that'). The larger a word appears in the word cloud is relative to how often the participants used that word in the interviews. Data included in the compilation of these word clouds were also coded to produce the themes that follow this section.

Participants returned transcripts and from their semi-structured interviews expediently along with their signed Data/Transcript Release Forms (Appendix D), which enabled the interpretive panels to be conducted before the end of April, 2015. The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically in an iterative process that is outlined in detailed later in this chapter. Appendices G and H include the statements given to participants in the interpretive panels. The modified interpretive panels were conducted in rooms booked through support staff for students' union and administrative participants. The rooms were arranged for participants to be facing each other with refreshments available, and were recorded with an iPad application called Voice Record and a digital audio recorder.

It proved extremely difficult to find a time when the individuals in both groups were all available for the interpretive panel. As a result, I reviewed the interpretive panel material individually with one member of the students' union Executive and one university administrator at a different time. Additionally, I was unable to secure participation in the interpretive panel from one students' union participant. Efforts were made to find a time that suited the participant, but it proved unworkable.

While this was disappointing, I am confident this did not affect the outcomes of this research.

This process enabled more coherent frames of meaning to be crafted from the data and participants (Giddens, 1976, 1979). Guiding questions allowed the researcher to probe the reaction of the panel to the information; the panels attempted to determine if both groups have a grounded and comprehensive understanding of the frames of meaning the other group utilized, and how these differing frames influenced the relationships and perceptions of each.

*Observation.* Most observations were made in formal organizational governance meetings that were open to the public. Meetings of the students' union governing body, the Council of Students (COS), and the university governance body, the Senate, were attended, and minutes from other university governance meetings were reviewed for relevant data. Information on the activities of the Board of Governors, on which the students' union has representation, was sparse due to confidentiality practices of the university. Attention was primarily paid to instances where members of the administration and the students' union physically interacted, or when they spoke of each other in addition to general observations about the meetings. Also reviewed was the students' newspaper, and a newsletter routinely published by the administration about the campus community for the period under study.

*Drawings.* As a momentary aside, it is important for the reader to understand the context in which this method emerged. During an individual interview, one participant drew a Venn diagram to further elucidate her/his understanding of how

the university and students' union are related. This proved quite helpful in advancing the conversation. The method, drawing, was expanded to all participants, and enabled them to "make sense of their reactions" (Kearney & Hyle, 2004, p. 377). Giving participants the unstructured freedom to draw their experiences "helps to combat any preconceived biases of the researcher that might have otherwise been unintentionally imposed" (p. 378).

After the completion of the interpretive panels, participants were asked to illustrate, with provided markers and paper, the relationship of the students' union with the university. Other qualifying statements were used if participants needed clarification, such as *place the students' union in relation to the university/the university community* or participants were asked *is the students' union internal or external to the rest of the university?* Participants completed the drawings at the end of the interpretive panels, and provided verbal explanation. Kearney and Hyle (2004) stressed the importance of interpreting the drawing with the participant, enabling the participant to elucidate their ideas. Notes were made on the drawings themselves to ensure clarity throughout the research process. I replicated these drawings using Google Draw, which served to protect participant's identities and provide more uniform data presentation. Drawings were edited for clarity, but effort was made to protect the original intent as explained by participants. Each figure represents the perspective of a different participant, except for figures 4.3.1, 4.3.2, and 4.3.3, which are by the same participant illustrating different parts of the relationship.

## **Data Analysis**

Basic thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013) was conducted on the data received from the individual interviews. After the transcript release forms were returned with the transcripts and corrections completed, the transcripts were read again to become re-acquainted with the data. Due to the diverse nature of the data collected, the method of analysis deemed most appropriate was Eclectic Coding. Saldaña (2013) presented Eclectic Coding as appropriate when “qualitative data can be appropriately coded using a repertoire of methods simultaneously” (p. 188). For this research, I utilized a variety of coding methods, such as sub-coding, inVivo, and open, in addition to a more generalized theming of the data.

Multiple rounds of coding were completed in an iterative process, with codes becoming more refined with each round. There was no specific tool or pre-existing framework that drove the development of the codes and the larger themes identified in Chapter Four. The coding process was informed by the research questions for this dissertation, as well as the themes from the literature regarding politics and cultural organizational analysis. Further, the interview questions were based on Tierney’s (2008) Framework of Organizational Culture—as depicted in Table 1—which influenced the coding process during data analysis. Coding was initially completed by hand using the transcripts and pencil, which followed Saldaña’s (2013) advice for students who are new to the research process. After the coding of all eight individual interview transcripts were completed, each participant was assigned a colour (i.e., green, pink, blue, and grey) and each code was written on a coloured sticky note that corresponded with the specific participant. These sticky

notes were then categorized into larger themes, amalgamated with other sticky notes, or discarded if unhelpful. This process was repeated with data received from the interpretive panels, and ethnographic data was integrated last. The nine themes and their sub-themes presented here are the result of this analysis.

**Quality and rigor of research.** Measuring and ensuring quality within the qualitative research purpose has been a significant source of debate within the research community for decades (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Tobin & Begley, 2004). While I have no interest in attempting to conclude this discussion, a discussion of quality and rigor of the) identified three areas in which quality and rigor within qualitative research need to be examined: users' needs, data collection, and research design (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, pp. 474-475). Within each, multiple approaches were used to ensure a high quality of research output.

**Users' needs.** People are the centre of educational and behavioural research. This includes not only the research participants, but also the readers and populations the research is to reach. The research itself needs to be useable to not just the community it is serving, but the reader of this dissertation must be able to take something away from the experience (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This dissertation was constructed to fill a large void in how we conceptualize and understand the social structures of the university.

Part of consideration of the user's needs is in the style of writing and engaging with the data. Gall, Gall, and Borg urged researchers to "Be honest and straightforward. Use an authentic reporting style so as to achieve *verisimilitude*, [sic] a style of writing that draws readers so closely into subjects' words that these can be



palpably felt” (p. 474). This enables the reader to contextualize and understand the experiences of the participants on a much deeper level. As such, the experiences of the participants are presented as authentically as possible. Visual depictions of raw data were used, such as word clouds and drawings from participants, in addition to presenting the ideas with their own words as much as possible.

Lastly, this case study acted as a great learning tool for me, the researcher. Case studies as a tool for learners of research processes “For researchers, the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important in two respects. First, it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality... Second, cases are important for researchers’ own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 303). As articulated in the preface to this dissertation, I used this process to explore my own skills and abilities within the research process, and in particular the role of theory. Also as a user of this research, I feel I benefited greatly from the use of the case study design.

**Data collection.** A popular method of ensure rigor and quality within qualitative research is triangulation (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) identified this as varying “the methods used to generate finding and see if they are corroborated across these variants” (p. 474). Multiple methods were used to collect data from diverse sources in a number of settings including semi-structured interviews, modified interpretive panels, ethnography and observation, and drawings. There was a balance between participant provided data and environmental data sought to gather rich data that is

“detailed and varied enough to provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 475).

**Research Design.** Much of the rigor surrounding the research design has already been addressed through the prior discussion of epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, and method (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Flyvbjerg (2011) argued, “the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied. Only in this way can researchers understand the viewpoints and the behavior that characterizes social actors” (p. 310). A detailed discussion about researcher positionality and relationship to the research was presented earlier in this chapter and will not be reproduced here. However, a short discussion of the case study method and concerns of validity is warranted. Case studies enable the researcher to gain a broader and richer understanding of the phenomena under study.

Researchers are able to find and reject variables and ideas throughout the research process, gaining a more accurate understanding of the social reality actors operate within. The intimate nature of this case study, and my prior experience in university and student politics enabled deeper and more “valid descriptions of social activities.” The case study, used in this way, “contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher’s preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than toward verification” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, pp. 310-311).

In addition to constructing a research design based upon a thorough examination of the literature and research, supplementary steps were taken to ensure quality and rigor within the research process. *Member checking* was utilized to ensure accuracy of data, “which involves having research participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 475). The first draft of chapter 4 was returned to participants to review for accuracy in addition to all transcripts of interviews and interpretive panels. Participants raised no concerns about the transcriptions and initial interpretation of data collected.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research projects utilizing human subjects must take ethical considerations into account. This dissertation has done so pursuant to the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Sciences Research*, and *University Council* guidelines. It received approval on December 9, 2014 from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (#BEH 14-412). All data collected will be saved for five (5) years in a locked cabinet in the Department of Educational Administration. All names and identifying information were removed from interview transcripts with pseudonyms utilized when necessary. Due to the utility of interpretation panels, anonymity was impossible to guarantee internally during the second phase of data collection. This was made clear in the consent forms. All names and identifying information were removed from interpretive panel transcripts with pseudonyms utilized when necessary. Participants were given the

opportunity to review and approve transcripts of their interview and of their participation in the interpretive panels prior to dissemination.

**Confidentiality.** All identifiable information were removed from any public documentation including the final draft of this dissertation. Documents themselves will be noted, but will not be cited due to confidentiality. Considering the breadth of information available on the Internet, quotations could easily identify both the research site and the participants. Gender has been removed from discussions as an unnecessary construct. Some individuals contacted to participate within the research declined due to fear of losing anonymity.

### **Summary**

A critical interpretivist approach enabled a living approach to the research design (Berger & Luckmann, 1997; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). The freedom to explore multiple methods not only provided a very detailed picture of this part of the university's social structure, but it helped me grow in leaps and bounds as a researcher. The conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two helped guide the development of the theoretical and methodological framework for this dissertation. An exploratory case study methodology complemented the theoretical approach to research within a political and cultural framework (Baldrige, 1971; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008; Yin, 2009). This chapter primarily has outlined these frameworks, including how data was collected and analyzed. Chapter Four presents the results of the data analysis.

## **Chapter 4: The Evidence**

The first three chapters of this dissertation outlined the foundation upon which to explore the data collected. This chapter provides such an exploration, with analysis restricted to the themes I found that emerged from the data. Transcription and the iterative process of theming create an intimate relationship between the researcher—myself—and the subject under study. As I transcribed, I quickly identified unique verbal tics of everyone involved, and I feel a stronger sense of kinship with my participants after spending many hours with their words and ideas. With this, the themes and analysis provided below is my interpretation of the data, and presents a rich and detailed environment for analysis in Chapters Five and Six through engagement with the conceptual framework. To reiterate, the use of my interpretations is not to be construed as a 'bias' that should have been controlled for; my theoretical framework embraces the expertise my background provides, involved the participants in the interpretation of their data, and understands reality as the result of infinite perspectives that are constantly changing and evolving through social interaction (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). I here attempt to present the data I collected as matter-of-factly as possible within the meaning participants held. This was one reason I offered participants the opportunity to review an early incarnation of Chapter Four prior to analysis. I wanted to ensure that the themes and data represented here correspond with my theoretical and conceptual focus on power, positionality, and intersubjective creation of meaning.

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide important services, including student representation

within university governance structures and other supports, they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Even with the students' union's access to senior decision makers and vast organizational resources, university leadership has limited ability to make decisions inclusive of students due to a potential lack of awareness of their organizations and realities (Tierney, 2008). This dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

### **Themes from the Data**

First, I have compiled responses from participants regarding how they understand important/central terms/concepts of students' union, university, and university administration as presented by university administrators and members of the students' union are examined through word clouds and discussion. Word clouds can be found in Appendix I. Next, themes found in the data is presented organized under these topics: Relationships, Representation, Leadership,

Information Access, Students' Union Professionalized Bureaucracy, Power, Politics, Term Lengths, Interdependencies, and Disconnections Within each there are various sub-themes. I struggled with how to present the data, as every action I take as a researcher contributes to the reality created by the data. Different iterations of presentation were sifted through, such as assigning pseudonyms to the individual participants or presenting the data as a conversation between two distinct entities: the students' union and university administration. Pseudonyms were rejected as an option for ease of discussion, but also to protect confidentiality. I am conducting this research within a very small social and professional network, and although unlikely, an individual may be identified when their comments in this dissertation are considered together. Additionally, while a conversation is evident in the following chapter, it was not necessarily an intentional act; this is not a conversation between two entities, but instead between two groups of people with divergent interests internal to each group. Presenting them as two opaque and homogeneous entities would be disingenuous to the plurality within. Combining both sets of data, students' union and administration, proved to be a natural fit for this project, as many of the themes are complimentary and each group's data provided support for the others'.

### **Data Presentation**

Most data are presented primarily through thematic analysis, supported by quotations from participants in the individual interviews and interpretive panels, as well as ethnographic observations made in meetings and through document analysis. Although most data are presented as part of a larger group interpretation, significant variances will be noted. The footnotes supplement and/or offer the

specific contextual definition for these terms as they arise. Citations marks identify specific quotations from individual interviews or panel discussions. These citations are organized to assist the reader in understanding context, and are shown through Table 2. Each citation has a two to four numeric code, which corresponds to a specific line number in a master transcript of all interview and interpretive panels. If there is no numeric code attached, it should be assumed that data was collected through observations or document analysis.

**Table 2**  
***Participant and Method Identification for Numeric Codes***

<b>Method</b>	<b>Administration</b>		<b>Students' Union</b>	
	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Interpretive Panel</b>	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Interpretive Panel</b>
<b>Numeric Code</b>	0-1923	1936-2500	2501-4947	4950-5692

### **Case Study Context**

Social research cannot be conducted within a bubble. Appreciating the larger context within which data was collected is necessary to better appreciate the outcomes in Chapter Five. Countless forces influence human behaviour, and it is impossible to provide a complete illustration of participants operating within their environment (Giddens, 1984). Personal contact and the larger environment in which it has been collected can influence observation of participants. Things like tone, body language, and other aspects of the physicality of the environment can impact how data is interpreted as well (Giddens, 1984). Here, context is provided for the reader in three circumstances: the larger social and political climate on the



university campus; university and students' union governance meetings; and, campus print media.

**Campus climate.** This university shared many of the same characteristics of institutions of post-secondary education in Western Canada. It had close ties to the surrounding community in relation to their research output, academic programs, and community engagement. The institution had a strong indigenous community relationship, which was consistent with other post-secondary education institutions in the region. Graduate and undergraduate students were represented by different students' unions. These two groups existed side-by-side with little engagement, and largely operated as sovereign entities. To reiterate, the data presented here are about perspectives of the undergraduate students' union and their administrative counterparts. While the organization that represented graduate students was mentioned in some interviews, it was largely used as a comparison to the undergraduate students' union. These comparisons are noted when they are relevant to the discussion.

Traditionally, there was a stable relationship on this campus between the students' union and the administration. They enjoyed a largely positive and collaborative relationship throughout the past decade, and completed multiple large-scale projects cooperatively. There were isolated incidents of public disagreement, with the past couple years enjoying an unusual amount of tension and conflict. Tension between groups on university campuses was normal for the period when data was collected. Campuses across the country were the subject of tense campus dynamics and relationships due to many provincial governments

reducing government funding for post-secondary education, prompting many universities to need to find millions in savings in budgets that were already stretched (Jones, 2014). As is common in situations when resources are scarce, conflict arose on many campuses in Canada in the form of protests and turnovers in senior administration and university leadership. The financial climate at UNS for the past couple of years recounts a similar story. Budgets were cut and people lost their jobs, which made the maintenance of healthy relationships between groups difficult across campus. Relations between the students' union and the university administration were no exception. Since this time, there have been a number of leadership changes within the students' union and the university administration, creating a unique time period to collect data. Although much of the data collected spoke to a largely positive and enjoyable relationship between the two, one individual encapsulated the campus environment well when discussing their approach to conflict

we're neighbours and friends, so why don't we shake hands and say 'Josie, you have a problem with me? Why don't you tell me? Come and see me.' That's what I've been doing with some of the key critics of some of [the university's] policies. I don't take it personally, and I say 'come sit! Have a tea. Why don't we talk?' (958-961)

Although the overall relationship was positive and largely respectful, and as with any situation where two groups who must work together have differing interests, conflict is a norm. This was to be expected, and especially as similar conflict existed

on other university campuses it should not be interpreted as being uniquely problematic in interactions and relationships between the two groups.

Much of this chapter includes discussions of competing perceptions, power dynamics between unequal partners, and a lack of self-awareness, which can easily be interpreted in a harsh method. It is necessary to state, in case my words are unclear at some point, that each participant expressed the utmost respect for their colleagues and adversaries. Each recognized limitations in the systems and in each other, but did so, usually, as matter-of-fact and not to assign blame. Any problems with the relationship were generally explained by remarking that, “it’s just reality!”

***Students’ union public governance meetings.*** The Council of Students (COS) was the governing board for the students’ union, and met on a semi-regular weekly basis. Meetings were open to the public. The COS existed in policy to promote a positive student experience for their membership and to guide the Executive Committee—or, the Executive. The body itself was comprised of representatives from different colleges, in addition to representatives of special or marginalized groups (such as international or Indigenous students). The student Executive members are also members of the COS with the same rights and privileges as other representatives.

The Chair was a member of the students’ union but not a voting member of the COS and sat at the end of the table. The Executive Director was a member of the students’ union professional bureaucracy and not a member of the students’ union—meaning, they were not an undergraduate student at that university—, and they sat at the other end of the table. The President of the union sat with the

Executive Director and the Vice-Presidents were scattered throughout the table with the other student representatives. The President spoke to issues of concern for the whole students' union, while Vice-Presidents primarily spoke to issues related to their portfolios. Engagement from the Executive Director was primarily restricted to supporting the Executive with information, and providing guidance when asked. Although formal in process, these meetings of the COS were often jovial and friendly, and were respectful even amongst disagreement.

Members of the university administration routinely attended and presented on various student-related topics such as campus initiatives and university reviews of student services. Questions were asked in a respectful manner and student representatives seemed satisfied with the answers received. Executive members and the university administration commonly traded flattery and gentle jokes during this time, appearing very comfortable and familiar with each other. Members of the administration did not come to these meetings without invitation from the Executive members, and leadership from members of university governing bodies never attended during the period under study. Administrators were comfortable enough to try telling jokes about 'transparent decision-making', which solicited laughter and groans from the students, further indicating a positive and respectful atmosphere. Administrators appeared calm when challenged by student representatives, and in one instance a second student representative defended a senior administrator against criticism from another student representative. These meetings were the university administration's primary interaction with student leaders on campus outside their relationships with individual Executive members.

This enabled these other student representatives to ask their own questions about the university and gain independent understandings of university operations and leadership. Entire meetings centred around the Executive explaining how the university and college administrations operated to enable other student leaders to be more effective within their own representative roles within their colleges and/or units.

Other student leaders not affiliated with the students' union—outside of their union membership—were also brought to COS meetings. The purpose for bringing in these student leaders varied, with some groups asking for funding, others asking for support on specific issues, and others to raise awareness. Exchanges between the COS and other student leaders were respectful and supportive, with the COS sometimes providing financial assistance even when it was not asked for.

Although the intention of the COS was to provide students with the opportunity to be engaged within the students' union governance framework, it was clear that in practice the Executive drove the agenda for these meetings and consistently were the primary participants in debates. Other members of the COS were engaged in meetings, but generally played a reactive or passive approach in their positions. An Executive member corroborated this insight and saw the COS for what it could be instead of what it was at that point in time: "It could be a great resource for discussion, but that's not decision making, and that's what that body is technically for, for holding us accountable" (4311-4313). This body was supposed to be where the Executive committee got their direction and continued legitimacy from their membership, but it did not even provide a functional space for fruitful

discussions on issues at hand. The COS operated as a conduit to distribute information to the study body that the Executive deemed necessary.

***University public governance meetings.*** Two separate bodies governed the academic and financial decisions for the University. The Senate was responsible for academic decisions and matters, while the Board of Directors was responsible for financial and operational matters within the university. University Senate<sup>2</sup> meetings were conducted in public, while much of the University Senate's work was completed through committees whose meetings were not open to the public. Decision items and reports from these committees are included in some University Senate packages available on the institutional website, but minutes were not available for review. Each committee had at minimum one and at maximum two student representatives, one of which normally was an undergraduate Executive member. There were no meetings of the Board of Governors open for public attendance. The minimal documentation available through the website in the form of meeting summaries were reviewed and included as needed.

Meetings of the Senate were primarily attended by faculty members and members of university administration. There were several seats on the Senate for student representatives outside of the domain of the students' union, but many were unfilled. It was difficult to discern between students who were representatives

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<sup>2</sup> The University Senate is the academic governing body of the university. It is comprised primarily of faculty, students, and senior administration (such as Deans and the President). It is part of a university system that is dominated by primarily bicameral governance structures, with a Board of Governors responsible for university finances and resources. Membership of the Board of Governors can include faculty members, students, community members, professionals, government appointments, and alumni representatives.

on the Senate and students who were there to observe. Most students in attendance did not appear to be affiliated with either students' union. Both unions had a reoccurring spot on the agenda to deliver a written and/or oral report where they focused on updates on regular governance details (e.g., elections, events, etc.) and positions on political topics on campus. The Senate Chair did not allow questions to be asked to students' unions, except in one instance where the Chair granted special permission. These reports acted to inform the governance body and were not intended to promote engagement, receive feedback, or promote exchange or dialogue with faculty or the university. Many of the statements Executive members made had an activist tone, but did not attempt to involve the Senate within an activist agenda.

**Campus print media.** Two separate media sources were reviewed for applicable information, a university administrative newspaper and a student newspaper. Although many articles reviewed were not written directly by the students' union or university administrators, other than the journalists themselves who are employees of the university in the same manner as other administrators—they served as useful tools in understanding a larger context for an exploration of political organizational culture. They have very different target audiences, which became increasingly clear.

***University newspaper.*** This newspaper was produced on average once a month. It was primarily concerned with the campus community, and was targeted towards members of the university administration. The bulk of information in this publication related to research occurring on campus, future and past campus events,

spotlights on personnel, and national and international accolades. There was very little discussion of students or student related news other than an introduction of the Executive just after they took office. When students were discussed, the students' union was rarely mentioned, as the conversation was considered within a larger discussion of administrative work (i.e., reporting on student survey results and what they mean for administration). There were no stories solely focused on the students' union and their activities other than the initial interview at the beginning of their terms. This was not a publication for students at the university; this media was produced for staff and administration of the university and discussed primarily administrative issues, of which politics and conflict were absent.

***Student operated campus newspaper.*** This newspaper was produced on average once a week, and was run by a non-profit organization separate to that of the students' union. They had editorial autonomy from both the students' union and the university. Most content was focused on the university community and student interest stories, but also included stories about the larger community in which the university was situated. All articles were written by undergraduate students of the university, and the majority were not concerned specifically with the students' union. However, several articles were focused on the students' union and/or the university administration. The newspaper spoke either positively or neutrally of the Executive or Students' Union, with few articles that offered criticism or critique. Unlike the administrative newspaper, the students' newspaper engaged with administrators on a few topics relating to student issues and larger campus



concerns. It is noteworthy, however, is that the students' newspaper presented the relationship as positive and collaborative.

### **Participant Perceptions of Key Concepts: Students' Union, University, and University Administration**

Participants were asked to explain the following concepts: students' union, university, and university administration. Many participants, both within the students' union and the university administration, visibly struggled to provide an appropriate and accurate description of these concepts. They explained it was not because they were unfamiliar with the concepts, but they had not thought about how to define them before. Participants revelled in the exercise, with one participant thoroughly having enjoyed the task: "You're causing me to think and talk about things I haven't ... thought about! You do it, and it's there, but to really actually define it, this is a rather interesting exercise" (691-692). The perspectives of the students' union are presented first, with that of the university administrators next. Significant disagreements between participants in each group are noted.

**Students' union participants' perceptions.** The data represented in this section encompasses the perceptions of the students' union participants on three concepts: the students' union, university, and university administration. All participants spoke about the purpose of each in similar manners, which is shown through the word clouds in Appendix I and the following analyses.

***Students' union.*** Almost all students' union participants gave very short, matter of fact responses to the question "What is a students' union?" or "What is the

role of the students' union?" However, one participant took the opportunity to muse out loud and responded that

I don't think there's a model to answer that. Why does any union exist?  
To represent and defend the interests of its members. This assumes a lot of common interests of undergraduate students, and that assumes that the students' union, execs [Executive Committees], and council are in those positions are going to try their best to understand, gather, and express those interests. It also exists to provide certain services to its members, to enhance the life of students, whether that be through defense of their interest or promoting them in different ways. That could include everything from the student health and dental plan, to the different events at [the students' union pub], [and] small businesses. We focus on providing amenities for students. Improvements to life. It's not like there couldn't be a pharmacy set up somewhere else, but because it's in [the students' centre]; it's in a student friendly and focused building. We hope we can facilitate the best provision of service... (3887-3897)

Other participants focused on this same advocacy mandate of the students' union in their definition, and when additional data surrounding the purpose and role of the students' union was added from other parts of the interview, a different primary function emerged; that of service delivery. These findings are consistent with the word cloud used in the interpretive panels through Figure 3.1 in Appendix I.

*Advocacy.* Student participants saw the students' union as the representative student voice on campus, acting as a conduit to the university and external world for

students' needs, interests, and ideas. One student argued representation was needed because of "the collective action problem. You have so many people you can't get them all directed in one way so you narrow it down to a few agents, but also they have time constraints ... [and so] they delegate to us the authority for advocating on their behalf" (3234-3240). Here the Executive fills the role of the agent, and advocates for their principle, the undergraduate students. As such, the students' union existed as an organization to advocate for the needs and rights of their membership. This advocacy function was all encompassing, stretching from issues around tuition fees, to the strategic direction of the institution, or freedom of speech on campus (2536-2539; 3362-3365). They completed this through being an "intermediary or a conduit between students and the administration or the university as a whole" (3234).

*Service.* As Figure 2.1 illustrates in Appendix I, Executive members saw service as the largest function of the students' union. This word had to be scaled down to fit into the word cloud. All participants clearly spoke about the importance of the service function of the students' union to its' membership. Services included a health and dental insurance plan, affordable access to public transportation, the operation of the students' centre, and food and beverage businesses. This function grew through the students' union filling a "service gap" on campus where there was "some area there is a need or want in a membership that isn't being filled" (3228-3229). Although many services offered were initially proposals of the elected Executive, the bureaucracy of the students' union is responsible for the operation of most the services offered. One participant described the problem in the context of

the agent and principle theory of representation, and extended the definition of 'services' to also include their representative function.

**University.** Student participants spoke of the teaching, learning, and research mandates in their definition of a university. Participants saw these roles primarily in relation to the university's relationship with and responsibility to the surrounding community. The university was presented as such an integral part of the community that one participant found it "a little bit tough to draw the line between what is the university and what isn't" (3162-3163). Participants felt the university had a responsibility to engage with and help the community grow, as they believed people and their needs should be the primary focus of the institution.

**University administration.** University administration, according to the majority opinion of the students' union participants, encompassed those who worked at the university and were decision makers (2512). This is reflected in Figure 2.2 in Appendix I, with words like 'decisions,' 'implementing,' and 'direction' prominently displayed. One participant qualified the type of decisions university administrators made as "a lot of high-level decisions" (2518). Another participant saw them as the leaders on campus who "oversee, direct, govern, or organize the university and have no teaching responsibilities" (3187-3188). The primary perception among the students' union was that the university administrators were leaders who made decisions.

One participant had already tried to define the concept for themselves: "I've been kind of wrestling with this [who/what university administration is] during my term" (3863). They spoke of administration within a larger framework of collegial

governance, and discussed their role as an “act of administering and implementing that policy [of the University Senate” (3208-3209). Members of university administration were perceived to be the agent of university governance structures, which ultimately set the direction for the institution. However, many decisions are left up to administrators, making it difficult to accurately portray who members of the administration are and identify their role within the university (3863-3865).

**University administration participants’ perspectives.** The data represented in this section encompasses the perceptions of the university administrators on the three concepts: the students’ union, university, and university administration. All participants spoke about the purpose of each in very similar manners, which is shown through the following analyses and word clouds in Appendix I. These three concepts are detailed below.

***Students’ union.*** Administrative participants collectively spoke of the students’ union as a representational organization that provided a condensed undergraduate student voice to university administration and government. We see this reflected in Figure 3.1 with ‘student,’ ‘represent,’ ‘voice,’ and ‘think’ occupying the largest area. One participant spoke of the students’ union providing the “voice of the customer” (1131). Another saw the students’ union as the equivalent of the University Senate, but for students:

I sort of see them as the equivalent of Senate for faculty. They represent the students on campus. They have different voices, different concerns, different needs than faculty... [W]ithout having a unified voice, one single student with a problem won’t probably be heard at this university, or

won't be able to have enough influence to change policy or procedures that might be having a detrimental effect on students in general. The students' union should be the voice of the student that they bring to influence, introduce, or change policy, or procedures, in order to help students. (73-79)

This collectivist nature of the students' union was presented as their source of power to influence policy or decisions at the university, as they were believed to be "here to ensure that the administration of this university doesn't run rough over them [i.e. students]" (319-321). This collectivist power was believed to have a larger purpose, enabling the students' union to promote "the appropriate change to make it [the university] a better place to be" (2473). Participants felt that although certain types of initiatives were positive and important, they could only be initiated by the students' union. They argued that many student specific initiatives "wouldn't be of interest to us; it's not something we're advocating for, but it's definitely something the students' union would advocate for" (453-455). The students' union was perceived as responsible for a certain domain of student affairs on campus that the university did not provide.

One administrative participant spoke of the students' responsibility had to advocate for certain values or causes within the student body itself.

[T]he student's union could very well be an advocacy group for students to respect other students, sexual assault, etc. That shouldn't be just a university administration issue, with policies and rules and all, but I guess I'm making the argument too that the students' union could very

much be a strong force to encourage the student body to be respectful of others. (646-650)

They conceptualized the students' union as a partner to the university, where responsibility for creating a better campus was dispersed among several groups on campus, including the students' union.

Although not seen in Figure 3.1, the service function of the students' union was brought up a few times by administrators. One participant saw every person and group on campus having an administrative role, and pointed to specific services the students' union offered as examples of that administrative role. Also interesting to note was a tendency for participants to view the students' union as primarily engaged within non-academic student issues.

I haven't really seen them as being part of, and this could be historical too, the academic side of the equation. They tend to be more operational, day-to-day concerns: do they have health and dental coverage, do they have a bus pass, is there a process to ensure if they're accused of plagiarism where they can appeal that... it's more daily, mundane administrative items that they're involved in. (315-319)

**University.** In Figure 3.2 in Appendix I, I illustrate how university administrators discussed universities as large institutions that are separate from government with faculty members who perform research, teaching, and outreach. One administrative participant described the university as an interconnected organization, bringing the three components of research, teaching, and outreach into an overall purpose for post-secondary education:

There are research components—a lot of investigation into areas that wouldn't be viable in a business setting, but we still need to research them because as a society we need to continue to expand the bounds of our knowledge. This is a good place to expand those without having to worry about the bottom line; a public good that has the additional goal of training and educating a group—the next generation of young people.

(13-18)

Students were largely discussed in relation to the provision of their education, as “an integral part of all this,” for “[w]ithout students we would cease to exist in about two weeks” (669-671).

University participants identified stakeholders to be, including but not limited to alumni, faculty, the public (through government spending), national and international organizations, staff, and students. These are argued to be “unlike the stakeholders you would see in a private organization” (1517-1518). As a result, community engagement was presented as a must for the institution to build and maintain relationships with those who help support the university through monetary or non-monetary means. A university existed to “create knowledge, generate new ideas, and otherwise innovate on behalf of society as a whole” (1515-1515).

***University administration.*** University administrators saw themselves as facilitators for different sectors of the university; for the work of faculty, the governance structure of the institution, and the students' union. Administrative participants did not feel they were the decision-makers in the institution; they



agreed that they had to defend and implement their actions, but ultimately, they took direction from university governance bodies. In Figure 2.4 in Appendix I, I reflect this summary through its focus on ‘faculty,’ ‘students,’ ‘research,’ and the various governance bodies mentioned.

One administrator argued they are the

civil servants of the university, whereas the Board of Governors are elected or appointed by the government and are representative of the public stake in the organization. The faculty are represented by that elected Senate representative, the students are represented on the undergraduate side by that democratically elected President. University administration occupies the space below the Board of Governors and Senate governance, and are responsible to the President and the senior leaders for the directions set by those governing bodies. (1529-1535)

Another described their role as the “administrative specialists that can operationally ensure the university continues to run, but at certain levels ... also looks at the long term viability and strategic vision of this institution so that the faculty don’t have to worry about where their money is coming from every year” (41-44).

One participant offered a typology of administration within a university. They identified six categories of administration: academic; university operations; communications/donor relations; research; the University Secretary’s Office; and, the President’s Office, which “sets the vision and does a lot of outreach to make sure people on and off campus buy into that vision” (1106-1107). This same administrator was quick to credit the student population as playing “a huge role in

the administration of this campus. They play a customer role as well as an integral part of the teaching and learning mission” (1115-1116). The students’ union was part of university administration as well, with their role in service delivery singled out for acknowledgement. Most other administrative participants had a narrower understanding of what is encompassed within *university administration*.

Administrators believed they had a responsibility to the public due to their reliance on government funding, and they felt a responsibility to ensure money was spent appropriately (714-715). To fulfill these responsibilities participants argued administration develop a certain heightened authority on campus as “[a]dministration tends to accumulate power because it becomes vital for the running of this institution” (50-51). However, it remained clear that administration perceived their authority and mandate to come from the Senate and Board of Governors.

### **Themes from the Data**

Nine themes emerged from data analysis that fell under these topics: Relationships; Representation; Leadership; Knowledge/Information; Students’ Union Staff; Power; Constant Turnover; The Functional Students’ Union-University Relationship; and, Disconnections. The themes are organized under these topics and explored through discussion, with analysis and conclusion based on the research questions completed in Chapter Six. Both groups of participants—the Executive and university administrators—spoke about all these themes, but in different ways. Data from all participants is amalgamated under the themes; differences of opinion between participants are noted.

**Relationships.** Student and university administrators identified inter-personal relationships as essential for forming the foundation of their effective working relationships. Recalling the context earlier, the relationships themselves tended to be largely informal in nature, marked with high levels of trust and respect. It was described as a “good faith” relationship by a student participant while an administrative participant argued that “[a]ny administration that’s not working with or listening to the students is heading towards problem” (743-744). The creation and maintenance of these relationships was not without its challenges, but both seemed cognizant of these shared concerns.

**Informality.** A high level of informality and understandings of mutuality and collaboration characterized the students’ union’s relationship with the university. Relationships were identified as primarily based on personal connections between people, developing organically without concerted effort. This was also clear through observing interactions between Executive members and members of the university senior administration.<sup>3</sup> These interactions primarily occurred at public governance meetings for the students’ union and the university, which were described in more detail at the beginning of this chapter. The relationship between the students’ union and senior administration also appeared to be jovial and comfortable. When these two groups were in the same physical space, their interactions were marked with humour, playful banter, and respect. At one COS meeting, a senior university

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<sup>3</sup> *Senior administration* is a typology that is utilized by many campus players. Generally, this is referring to central university administration that appears responsible for many aspects of campus life. This would include those who hold the offices of President, Provost, Vice-Presidents, and Vice-Provosts in particular. The definition is fluid, with some including offices like Deans and Associate-Vice Presidents.

administrator began her/his presentation with praise for the quality of work the students' union President had conducted, and told the Council that they had been "having fun" working together. These interactions appeared to be normal within the relationship between the two groups, which corresponds with interview data from participants.

In interviews, administration participants recognized the importance of these relationships and saw them as "powerful" (1203). One administrative participant pointed to these relationships as an avenue students could take to influence change: "those are ways the students and the students' union can create change, and it's not from confrontation. It's more through networking, personalities, relationships, relationship building ... [that] influence [is won]" (952-954). This "significant informal network" (1144-1145) enabled some administrators to ensure students were consulted by the administration on student issues. Administrators formed what could be described in some cases as friendships with the Executive members they interact with on a regular basis. Both students' union and administration participants saw this informal avenue into decision-making as incredibly important, although some found reliance on informality to be uncomfortable:

So many lunches. I've given up so many lunches. I thrive on formality of goals and agendas and why are we here and what are we doing. So I'm personable, but I'm not particularly effusive or folksy without reason to be. (5582-5584)

There was a certain level of suspicion from some students' union participants regarding how genuine some of these relationships were, as they sometimes felt patronized in meetings by administrators.

For most I was deeply suspicious because a lot of them are overly friendly. They immediately try to get you to like them. That is the first thing they do. They want you to like them. Whether that's a pragmatic consideration, whether they know that if I like them life will be easy for them, or if they genuinely just want us to like them, I don't know. But that was my first impression. (3530-3533)

Another students' union participant echoed this sentiment, albeit with different considerations.

It's like this weird sort of displaced suspicion, because as much as I say administrators don't wake up in the morning wanting to mess with student lives, I'm still aware of my oppositional position so I have priorities. I do like to develop relationships and assess what people are about before I make assumptions, because I know no one is going to work for the interest of students except me, so I don't want to let that go. (4083-4088)

While building and maintaining relationships with administrators was recognized as a necessity for creating change on the university campus, participants from the students' union still reported themselves as oppositional to the university administration.

**Formality.** Although informal relationships were presented as the foundation of the relationship between the students' union executive and their administrative counterparts, some formalized aspects to the relationship were present.

Administrators were more likely to see the formalized aspects of the relationship as important and positive than members of the Executive. For example, members of the Executive sat on several university governance and *ad hoc* committees.

Introductions to many mid-level administrators took place at the first meeting of these committees for new Executive members, while many members of the senior administration were introduced to the students through annual and monthly meetings. Although these were formal events they were conducted in informal manners. For example, the Executive and members of senior administration had scheduled monthly meetings. There were no formal agendas for these meetings, but students and administration members indicated they came to them with items in mind to discuss. Although these meetings were not specifically intended to build relationships, administrative participants felt these formalized structures were important to cultivate relationships with the Executive. One administrative participant in particular believed the informal nature of the relationship could benefit from more formalization:

I will just go for walks with [members of the Executive], and we will have some of those conversations [administration providing advice to the students' union Executive members], and I think having those kinds of outlets formalized, actually would be a really good thing. (1199-1201)

However, a students' union participant saw this as an attempt to "guarantee success," which s/he felt was impossible (5588-5589). Instead, a students' union participant argued individuals have different ways of developing and maintaining relationships, and how to do this needs to be left up to the individual.

***Special and unique.*** Both groups described their relationship with the other as "unique" (1584) within the Canadian environment. For the most part, participants saw their relationship as positive and mutually beneficial, although it was clear there had recently been—within a year or two—significant conflict at the university. Specifics are unnecessary to recount—especially when consideration is given to confidentiality—but there was a period where the trust and respect that had marked their relationship had been forgotten. However, this seems to be an event of the past; both sides of the conflict seemed confident in their ability to move forward and work together effectively. I saw the relationship between the students' union and the university as marked by significant levels of mutual trust and respect, with limited adversity and conflict experienced as people seemed to work in a cooperative manner as a norm.

***Trust and respect.*** Participants expressed a great amount of trust and respect towards counterparts. One administrative participant stressed that "[i]t has to be two way. You won't trust someone else if you don't sense they trust you. Or respect. The two go hand in hand" (2112-2114). This was exemplified at public governance meetings, with expressions of value commonly voiced for the other group. Student leaders strove to maintain mutual respect at least partially as a tool to influence the system; without mutual respect, their voice would lose some legitimacy, as

Executives feared members of administration would be less willing to listen to them or help with projects. As such, keeping in the 'good books' of administrators was not positioned as necessarily compromising the student leader's integrity as democratic agents; it did not restrict the students' union in their advocacy and representative functions. Really, the relationships based on trust and respect Executives built were the tool that enabled them to actualize their goals. But, respect was not something someone had, and was instead presented as part of an ongoing process, that inevitably will come into conflict with shared or unshared realities. As a students' union member argued, it "doesn't mean shying away from the hard issues. You have to go after the hard issues but you also have to do it in a way that is respectful of people and process" (2933-2936). One member of administration explained why this respect was critical to the success of the students' union:

It's not that necessary that I agree with them, but I work really close with them and I value and respect their opinion and we don't always have to see eye to eye, but I generally have a positive view of them so I will give them the benefit of the doubt and try to work with them to make sure their policy or proposal is workable. If I didn't have that type of relationship, I probably wouldn't invest any resources into trying to make sure their vision is implemented. (584-589)

Trust was directly tied to ability to work with people and achieve goals. Trust enabled the students' union and administration to cooperate even in times of intense disagreement.



*Cooperation.* The Executive and the university administration had a positive and strong relationship. Their unique and quality relationship allowed the students' union and administration to work together, even through times of disagreement. When issues arose, student participants wanted to focus on the issue instead of the conflict between individuals or groups. They positioned the students' union and administration as part of a team that is together "against an issue" instead of against each other (4826). An Executive member told the COS, "the university is very hard to deal with sometimes, as much as I love them." University administrators shared this view; one administration participant said that it was

wonderful to have that open and honest dialogue about what matters and what are the issue you're trying to achieve, and it's not an adversarial relationship. It's like a 'how can we work together to improve student success rates when they're on campus, improve their ability to get to campus, to meet their ability to meet their goals once they graduate through the whole life cycling of the students.' I think we have a really exceptional space here. (1572-1577)

The students' union took an almost de-personalization approach to their relationship with university administrators in this view; they removed the personal from the politics and focused at the issue at hand, but student participants still recognized the humanity and reality of the administrators they worked with:

these are some of the busiest people that I know, so to go and have them accept more work from an undergraduate student takes a lot of preparation a lot of convincing sometimes, and if you can manage to

convince them then they see something in you worth taking the time and energy on. (3124-3127)

The students' union believed administrators had the best interests of the university and students in mind when they made decisions; administrators just did not have the time needed to dedicate significant attention to student issues. Administration echoed this sentiment, and identified exactly how this affected their ability to help students:

I hate to say that, but we are very reactionary in our business processes. I don't like that. I'd rather create policies and procedures so we know what we're doing, and it'll take less time, and we can help the students and faculty in other ways! (629-631)

Just as students had recognized, administrators were overworked and could not proactively and ideally address issues with the students' union. The Executive understood and appreciated the human limitations of university administrators and expressed compassion for their colleagues. Conversely, administration participants were pleasantly surprised during the interpretive panel at the lack of adversity in the students' union's data. They expected—based on their experiences and those in their professional circles in Ontario and Quebec—the students' union to have a more adversarial attitude towards the university.

Many former Executive members can be found working in the administration for the university. An administration participant felt this is a sign of the quality of the relationship (1590), while an Executive member cautioned against the relationship becoming too familiar and informal. They believed the students' union

should be more than a training ground for university administrators. In this way, students' union participants worried close relationships could have a placating effect on some of the more radical ideals present throughout history in student politics.

***Danger of co-optation.*** Although both groups saw their relationship as strong and positive, both identified a danger of the relationships becoming too friendly, particularly where doing so would inhibit the students' union's ability to carry out its mandate. Some of the student participants felt administration intentionally tried to co-opt members of the Executive, while others identified it as an unintentional hazard due to the close working relationship between the two. One administrator shared this concern, and worried that "if we had too much of an impact [on the Executive], we would then shape their views too much for them to play anything but an ancillary role of another administrator" (393-394), or as another administrative participant described, "We do sort of view them as mini administrators, for good or for bad that's true" (2087-2088). There are inter-personal considerations to this as well, as one student pointed out: "The more you get to know and understand someone, the more you can understand their point of view and might be less willing to challenge and make things more difficult for them" (4138-4141).

The danger was also recognized by the student body and student run newspaper. One student participant noted that

A thing I was asked during the campaign and also by the [student newspaper], and I tried to think myself, will I have mission drift because of my constant interaction with administrators. That is who I work with.

Will I end up thinking of myself more as one of them instead of as a student, or will I start to see their point more? And I think that's something very real to guard against. There should be barriers and boundaries between us, even if I work most with administration, I'm still working for students. (5680-5685)

Participants from both groups did not suggest ways to guard against this co-optation, although they almost unanimously saw it as an important consideration to acknowledge.

**Representation.** Students' union and university administration participants saw representation as central function of the students' union. Within this discussion a number of sub-themes emerged, primarily as a result of frustrations and challenges identified by participants. Sub-themes are organized under the following topics: the student's union as the voice of [some] students; student radicalism; feelings of tokenism expressed by the students' union participants; and realities and challenges surround engaging students within the university and within the students' union.

***Voice of [some] students.*** While university administrators viewed the students' union as the voice of all students, the students' union presented their representative function more narrowly. Administration expected the Executive Committee to operate with board solidarity, and argued that "[i]f there's division within the Executive, it hurts their voice" (534-535). Student participants felt unity of voice was an unrealistic expectation as they saw themselves as individuals with different priorities, instead of a unit that worked on initiatives and projects as one.

Their understanding was, “[t]hat’s how representation works when you have a diverse constituency. I guess there’s trade offs... maybe we went for a more authentic, and yet complicated, approach to our different portfolios” (5387-5390).

Administrative participants wanted only one voice to represent the students, in an effort to respect the students’ union’s legitimacy and for ease of consultation. One administrator argued that

I’m not going to support a special interest group. If you’re going to do that you have to be supported and sponsored by both students’ unions [undergraduate and graduate]. Otherwise I can’t talk to you in that way. We have representative functions on campus; they hold the vote. (1165-1168)

This administrator was not alone in this logic, as another participant did not see it appropriate to have students sit on university committees unless the process was overseen by the students’ union. Other administrative participants felt that if a student wanted to be involved in change on campus that they would use the students’ union as the vehicle for that change:

You’re not going to just have ideas bubbling up from the student body itself. Look at the turnout usually, I don’t know what it is now but it’s roughly 20% at elections. That’s no worse than civic politics, but I wouldn’t anticipate there’s much coming up from the student body unless it’s someone who’s going to run for office and says, “I’m going to make a difference and this is what my platform is.” So I think the whole plan, the mission, really originates in the Executive, with feedback from

the general student population, with some gentle guidance from the [Executive Director]. (809-815)

However, observations made at public meetings and within the students' and administrative newspapers presented a slightly different account. There were multiple instances where members of the senior administration met with groups that included a significant number of non-union affiliated student leaders. Another participant mentioned sharing a meal with another group of non-union affiliated student leaders. Administrative engagement with student leadership to gain perspective was not limited to students' union structures. Student leaders operating outside of the purview of the students' union also interacted with university administration in an effort to form relationships and perhaps gain legitimacy in discussions.

Student participants knew many university administrators viewed the students' union as the only legitimate student voice on campus, and passionately argued that instead, "[w]e're not the voice of students. We're the voice of some students certainly. But the most engaged students don't want anything to do with us" (5237-5239). They expressed high levels of respect for other student leaders, and cautioned administration against ignoring these non-students' union leaders. A students' union participant believed that, "[t]he political nature of the students' union has changed, and we're now with the student groups more, like we're letting them take the lead and we support where we can" (4945-4949). A student colleague argued that if the university administration does not listen to these non-students'

union affiliated leaders, they are contributing to a culture of student tokenism within the university:

I think often times the university is very comfortable with what I see to be the tokenism of students' union Executives. They say "well, what do you think about this?" and I'm not in engineering I have no idea what this is, if they're talking about something in the college of engineering they should be talking to engineering students. University administrators will often say to you that it is harder to get regular students involved. I can sympathize with them a little bit. It is hard to get students involved, but I also think that's their role. If they're talking about changes that are going to impact students they have to look beyond elected student leadership because we're not the norm of what a student thinks and what a student is. So that's something the university needs to have a plan for, moving beyond town halls, moving beyond blogs, and moving beyond the tokenistic representation of student leadership. (2900-2910)

This conversation about tokenism and student representation is explored in more depth later in this chapter. What is important here was the deference the Executive member gave to students and student leadership. The student body was diverse, and Executive members felt are incapable of representing the entirety of their membership due to this diversity. As a result, they believed university needed to expand the reach of their student engagement and give legitimacy to student voices outside of the construct of the students' union. However, to retain some legitimacy for students within the larger university world, Executive members would

sometimes “fake it”—knowing what students want—because they wanted the administration to keep asking (4285). They recognized they were viewed as the only voice of students much of the time, and changed their behaviour to capitalize on the space that was available for students to participate. Otherwise, there would be no student voice at any table.

*Council of Students.* The COS existed as a vehicle for the students’ union Executive to consult with the everyday student as their membership was largely disengaged, and their interests were incredibly varied due to the heterogeneous makeup of the student population. Due to this diversity, Executive Committee members found it difficult to articulate what their membership expects of them. “I don’t really know what students expect. Some students probably expect me to say ‘tuition is evil’, so they expect a particular direction of advocacy. Other students expect us to be malleable to their desires. Other students expect us just not to get drunk all the time. Other students expect us to get drunk all the time” (4370-4373). As such members of the Executive Committee used the COS to consult with students, and invited university administrators to attend and update the Council on university business. The Executive used the body to tap into the pulse of the student body as the COS had the “day-to-day student experience” they lacked (2889). At each meeting members of the COS would provide oral reports of events and issues within their respective units. At that time, there had been a major push for campus-wide student consultation on specific issues. A common theme in these oral reports was a desire for administration to use more structured and diverse attempts to gain student input into decisions. In one instance, a member claimed their college had



conducted the consultation after the decision had already been made by college administration, rendering the process moot.

Students' union participants spoke of challenges engaging with the COS. The students' union participants were very quick to say the students' union was not the most representative entity, as their membership was very diverse. They expressed a desire to have the COS better integrated into the decision-making processes of the students' union, but some expressed that "I don't think we know what else to give them to do" (4310-4311). Others argued administration does not know what the COS is or what it does, and as such it has no legitimacy within university administration.

**Radicalism.** The Executive felt they had to maintain a distance from more radical student activists to adequately represent their member's interests. To the Executives, radical student activism had narrow interests and little legitimacy within the university community—including with university administration—and thus had no place within the students' union. Executive members feared alienating the members of university administration they needed to complete their mandates, as influence was won through relationship building. Executive members believed the student body would not elect radicals and as such they had little appetite for an activist students' union. One participant argued, "Ain't nobody got sympathy for the red square" (5056-5057). To them, the students' union represented everyone and not just the radical and loud few.

One Executive member thought the student's union became more institutionalized as a reaction to radicalization of segments of the student body

across Canada. According to this argument, the students' union became professionalized and institutional, because "[w]hen you look at how radical the radical side has got, the institutional side can't work with them in the same way they used to be able to" (5027-5029). The students' union believed radical students had little legitimacy with university administration, and as a result the Executive consciously became pragmatic to work with the university administration and community:

let's be honest, radical activists don't have credibility with a majority of students. That's why they're radical activists... [A radical] would not have been able to achieve what we wanted to achieve, and he wouldn't have achieved anything because he was so focused on his priorities that aren't happening. (5499-5504)

Although these two roles were presented as diametrically opposed by the Executive, they were not opposed to working with radicals when interests collided:

for political reasons we very consciously keep [student radicals] at arms-reach, and then in the back room we work with [them], but it makes sense to bifurcate our roles. They have common goals, but it just makes sense to bifurcate two sets of activities, one being institutionalized and the other being more grassroots and a little more radical. (5004-5007)

One participant suggested these radical students acted as a check and balance on the students' union Executive and COS to ensure they did not swing too far towards institutionalization and bend to the will of university administration. Interestingly, many administrative participants perceived the students' union to be a lot more

radical and adversarial. Administrative participants believed the students' union had a central role in some recent conflict on the campus, but the Executive denied any involvement, and argued those students "don't want anything to do" with the students' union (5238-5239).

***Tokenism.*** Student participants felt their representation on university governance bodies and other university committees was tokenistic, instead of facilitating their engagement as equals in larger discourse. Administrative participants did not speak of tokenism, and when presented with students' union data surrounding these perceptions, administrators generally reverted to a conversation about the short terms Executives were in office—one year—as rationale for what they saw as students lacking the experience to confidently participate in these meetings. A more detailed conversation about term lengths will be presented later in the chapter. Regardless of motivation or rationale, an Executive member expressed concern about the impact of their representation on these formalized bodies, and asked "if that [seats on university governance bodies] is a meaningful representation or if it's more just tokenistic?" (2550). Another students' union participant explained the genesis of their feelings of tokenism:

I do worry sometimes about student union Executives being pulled into the university world too much, and being saddled with university jobs for the sake of tokenism. We're usually placed as the only student representatives on large university committees and often if that committee is going to do something that isn't in the best interest of students our one vote can't stop them. (2600-2605)

Even in situations where Executive members were given space to express their voice on governance committees, the willingness of administration and the university to listen to that voice was called into question:

There is an almost comic and absurd value expressed for consultation with the students' union. 'Look we talked to students! We found one and talked to them!'... it's not insincere, but short sighted. It feels tokenistic, it feels disingenuous, which is similar to insincere, but it's just... they know there's more that could be done, but they've done the thing. (4411-4415)

The same participant spoke of similar experiences when they were first elected to their position, which led to them feeling of patronized and frustrated.

And I have to tell you I felt pretty patronized for the first few meetings I went to, and I was just like guys, I'm here to do a job just like you are. Do you know I get a pay check? It's tiny but I get it, so let's all just get to work. There's some weird parts where I'm like, no guys let's not single me out because it makes me look like a token. (4157-4160)

In this frame, students were rare enough within university decision-making structures that even just the presence of a student— who was a salaried employee—was enough out of the norm to make that student feel uncomfortable. The Executive wanted to be equals, but even when given space they questioned the legitimacy and capacity of that space to have outcomes they feel some ownership over. What, then, was the capacity of these structures to meet the ends of the Executives, which primarily were defined by their individual campaign platforms? University governance was simply too slow, students did not have enough votes to

make a significant impact, and they questioned the authenticity of exchanges that occurred in those spaces.

***Student engagement.*** Students' union and administrative participants raised challenges and issues to engaging undergraduate students. At a basic level, there was no expectation for students to be engaged with university and students' union communities. Universally participants believed in the power and importance of engaging students in the larger community around them, but participants felt it was unrealistic in contemporary Canadian political culture. The university was "society writ small" (2071); participants pointed to the lack of civic engagement with basic public institutions, like citizens casting a ballot—especially among young people—in Canadian elections. Administrative participants argued only a small group of students wanted to be engaged within campus, and used low students' union election turnouts as evidence.<sup>4</sup> Student participants felt they lacked the infrastructure to properly consult with their membership and promote engagement. Regardless, the students' union still tried to engage students in formal and informal ways and sought out mentorship on issues from a variety of sources, such as through personal relationships with other student leaders. Some turned to their domestic partners, while others looked to important people from their childhood. Executives tried to do the best with the tools they possessed.

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<sup>4</sup> Students' union elections across Canada generally have election turnouts hovering around 20 percent. There are some exceptions to this rule, but they largely would be found in small institutions with a very close campus community and culture. For example, Quest University, a completely residential and undergraduate university campus, saw voter turnouts of over 50 percent during some student elections in the 2010s.

Administrators argued that “meaningful engagement” of students and the students’ union in making decisions on campus was important, and that engaging the students’ union within the governing structure was the university’s responsibility (1671). However, when asked why they wanted to engage with the students’ union and individual students, they struggled to produce a clear rationale.

Is it to have students really engaged and part of the family, and that could really improve their success as students and why they’re here, and help them on their way in their personal and professional lives. Or, is it about accountability and transparency, and sometimes it’s all of the above.

(2073-2076)

Some administrators questioned the effectiveness of consulting with and integrating Executive members into university structures:

I think [the Executive] knows more about what’s going on here than any other student. But does that help students? And I don’t mean that as a criticism of them. So that’s the student engagement. Students can be engaged, but does that affect the student body itself? (2076-2079)

The students’ union facilitated most contact the university had with students, either through the Executive members or the COS. The Executive brought university administrators to COS meetings, which provided an opportunity for student leaders to ask direct questions. However, motivations of university administrators for attending these meetings were unclear; multiple university administrators came to speak to the COS during the period of data collection, which appeared as a conduit to promote university policies and processes. Administrators were there to answer

students' questions, explain priorities, solicit some feedback on pre-determined and specific issues, and to build relationships, but not for large and substantive exchange.

University administrators believed undergraduate students were transient and could not fully understand the realities and limitations of the university; a student's ability engage meaningfully in university processes and decision-making was limited:

[We engage with students so t]hey will understand more why tuition is the way it is if they understand how that process that we went through last December. For a student to realize their tuition covers about 24-25% of the overall cost blows their minds. They can't accept that as a reality.  
(2051-2055)

This message was consistent through multiple themes of this chapter; the university's world was complex and required specialized knowledge for actors to efficiently operate.

**Leadership.** Leadership within the students' union was concentrated within the Executive committee. Executive members regarded the President of the students' union as an important symbol that acted as their formal leader, supported by a strong Executive committee who had independence within their own areas of jurisdiction. The President was promoted by most Executive members as a

first among equals sort of thing. We just basically have different portfolios. There isn't a whole lot of overlap, which is good, because you don't have like trump cards being pulled. (4335-4337)

However, this view was not universally held. One Executive member felt the President's office had significantly more power and authority than the rest of the Executive Committee, and that Vice Presidents were not always consulted when decisions were made.

Administrators perceived the President to be a symbol and the source of primary decision-making within the organization, as the Vice-Presidents were seen to have limited influence. One administrator had a deeper understanding of the students' union's structure and recognized the importance of the COS in decision-making, and perceived a flat hierarchy within the Executive (922). Another—after being prompted about the existence and role of the COS—believed this was also where decision-making and leadership should come from within the students' union.

***Student leadership qualities.*** The students' union and the university administration had similar understandings of what constitutes good leadership within the students' union. Students' union participants believed good leadership included being facilitative and constructive, having an open mind, being confident, open to compromise, and having integrity. It was important to work closely with university administration when appropriate, and that a good leader knew when to use different tools depending on the context of the situation. One student participant cautioned the use of conflict-based approaches: "There's a time and a place for activism, like radical activism... But I think that a lot more can actually be accomplished through respectful positive and collegial discussions" (5638-5640). Administrative participants largely agreed with these sentiments, and added that a good student leader should have clear goals, be accountable, personable, work on



multiple issues, and the Executive should have “unity of voice” when presenting those goals (533). An administrator argued that for the students’ union to have good leadership, they need to be willing and allowed to make mistakes:

It’s not that they won’t make bad decisions. They have to! Otherwise you’re too risk adverse and you don’t make any decisions. So I think the ramifications [when a bad decision is made] have to be that a lesson is learned. It’s the repetitiveness of bad decisions that we have to avoid. As long as you’re understanding why the decision as bad, and then change the behaviour so that it doesn’t happen repetitively, then it’s ok. It has to be...We should be encouraging people to not have the fear of making a mistake, because they’re going to make a mistake every single day.

(1452-1453)

One administrator stressed the importance and centrality of integrity to good leadership:

I really believe in the integrity of the office that you’re holding, and that if you don’t approach the position responsibility and with personal integrity that you not only do yourself a disservice because you’re just meeting the political expedient goals that you have to move yourself along this career path. If the representative is more interested in.... I think it’s Anthony Downs’, the rational economic man, and Wilson’s bureaucracy where that individual is just trying to create their own power base in that position, if that’s the way the students approach their position it may get them where they want to go in terms of their own

politically expedient and personal goals, but it makes it really really difficult to work with them to meet the needs of students, which is what our jobs are as university administrators. That puts us at odds. (1776-1785)

*Self-care.* To practice good leadership, some student participants felt they needed to first practice self-care. Student participants talked about personal challenges they faced holding public office for the students' union, such as feelings of isolation and anxiety.

That [self-care] is first and foremost. Self-care is something that needs to be focused on not just in the Executive, but for all people that work life balance is important. I know we always want to do the best work that we can but we can't do that best work if we ourselves are not performing at our best. (4505-4509)

They managed the exhaustion, isolation, political pressures, and lack of privacy through reflection and support from loved ones. However, this proved difficult for some due to the isolative realities of the work:

this is a really hard job and not a lot of people know that because not a lot of people have done it. It's a small circle that you can talk to and relate with because they've been there and they've done the job too. (2789-2791)

Administration who responded to this information in the interpretive panels had varied reactions. One administrator felt these feelings were to be expected in any public leadership role, and that it was the job of the Executive Director of the

students' union to provide necessary support. Another empathized with the student leaders, and wondered if there were existing individuals or services on campus that could help ease the transition into their positions.

**Accountability.** Accountability was an important aspect to a well-run students' union, but Executive members spoke about the challenges they faced in trying to communicate with their membership. The students' union did not have access to a list of their membership, and the university acted as an intermediary if any information needed to be distributed. This limited how well students could hold their leadership accountable. Executive members were aware of how limited anyone's capacity to hold them accountable to their word or for their actions. As a result, Executive members consciously tried to be accountable to a variety of sources. Executive members talked about listening to their membership, the COS, in addition to friends, family, and—to a certain extent—the university. Administration participants agreed it was difficult for students to hold their Executive accountable. Much of this discussion surrounded similar themes as identified under student engagement in this chapter.

**Information access.** Transferring information was one of the primary motivators identified for the relationship between the students' union and the university administration, but the amount and complexity of the university's information made it difficult for the students' union to understand and process. The students' union was presented as supplying the qualitative, student experience to the university administration. In terms of the university providing information to the students' union, there were concerns raised by both groups about the amount of

information the university has, and the ability for the students' union to process and understand the information.

**Quantity.** University administrators felt there was too much to know about the operation of the university for the students' union to feel well informed in their short terms. The students' union reported their challenge was not receiving information from the university, but instead knowing that it existed. Information was not conceptualized solely as words or numbers on a physical document; most of what students' union participants needed from the university was about roles and responsibilities of administrators within the university.

Nobody gave me that information that this is the person you should go talk to, and here is the institutional memory of that, and here's some challenges you might come up against. I had to find that out by myself....

It took me a good couple of months to figure that out... I really need the university to help me navigate the institution a little bit. (2812-2818)

They stressed a need to know who does what in the university, not just job titles and names, and orientations to committees and other bodies for which they have responsibility.

While administrative participants empathized with the Executive due to what they perceived to be a steep learning curve, they ultimately believed that the university is too complex for Executive members to fully understand in only one year. This is not unique to just the students' union, as one administrator said "[y]ou're never going to ever ever ever feel like you have adequate information" due to the size of the university. One participant called the attempt to learn everything

about the university as the “drinking through the fire hose approach” (1376), as there is too much accessible to the students’ union for them to be able to identify and isolate the information or issues they needed. As a result, the participant posited, students are distracted by little issues, and miss out on the big picture items. Students’ union participants stressed that they needed support from the university to help navigate its structures, people, and processes, but most administrative participants believed this to be the responsibility of the students’ union staff and not that of the university. There was recognition from some administrators that the university might have some responsibility in preparing Executive members

**Quality.** Administrators raised concerns about the ability of students, including the Executive, to understand the complexity of the information being presented. Administration argued they made a concerted effort to put everything on their website and that it is accessible to everyone. Students’ union participants echoed a concern about the ability of student leaders to grasp the material before them, but largely in the context of the university conducting consultations with non-students’ union affiliated student leadership. One participant maintained “students cannot be consulted or provide meaningful consultation feedback without important information at the outset, so they can form their perceptions” (4232-4233). Administration argued that for students to be able to comprehend the complex information the university has, it must be broken down into “digestible sound bites...[which] consumes a considerable amount of resources” (2350-2351). Another administrator used that same language and argued

They need us to be able to distil complex financial information into sound bites...They need university administration to synthesize complicated information for them so they can handle absorbing the information and still advocate on behalf of student and represent a position on complex issues in a way that is meaningful. (1788-1791)

One students' union participant identified this process as problematic, and questioned the validity of information the administration released in that sound bite form. S/he qualified this concern as not unique to university administration, but one universal to bureaucracies, for "where you ask an agency for information, and they have a vested interest that's triggered, and the information they give you is tailored in a way that favours their interests" (3613-3615).

**Students' union professionalized bureaucracy.** The students' union had a professionalized permanent bureaucracy that enjoyed a considerable amount of respect by the Executives and the university administration, and multiple key staff members performed a number of supportive functions for the Executive. The positive relationship the student's union bureaucracy had with university administration is illustrated by an administrator:

I know [the Executive Director of the students' union] very well; a wonderful person, a special friend, but we chat once a month. Not only as friends, but issues. And [s/he is] the continuity on that transient board at the [students' union]. (785-787)

Administrative participants largely spoke of the students' union bureaucracy as providing leadership within the students' union, while the students' union participants focused on the bureaucracy as service providers and mentors.

**Leadership.** Administration saw the students' union bureaucracy as leaders within the students' union who actively supported and influenced the Executive in their development and decision-making. The Executive Director of the students' union was seen to play an "administrative leadership role" (1859-1860). The Executive Director (ED) was a permanent full time staff member who directly oversaw the rest of the students' union staff and was accountable to the Executive. This position did not change after elections, and it directed the incoming transition period for new Executive members. From the perspective of the administration, the ED gave predictability and stability to the students' union. Administration members saw the ED as the biggest influence on the Executive, which some student participants agreed with while others vehemently disagreed. Participants made note that the students' union staff could play too large of a leadership role within the organization. One administrative participant thought it was possible for students' union staff to have more influence within university administration than the Executive (1885-1887). There was concern from both participants that because the student's terms were so short, the Executive must put their "blind trust" in their staff, who then could—unknowingly or not—exert too much influence on the Executives (2996). Other participants, primarily administration participants, perceived this influence to be restricted to when "students were heading off in a very disastrous direction" (817).

***Mentorship.*** The students' union administration was considered critical by both administration and students' union participants for the creation and maintenance of the institutional knowledge and memory for the organization, which included mentoring the Executive. Staff members were believed to have a "responsibility to ready" the Executive and act as a safety net when needed (3556). One participant within the students' union described the staff as having

a pretty big responsibility of setting up the scene and giving the broader context, institutional memory and all of the historic information that the President [of the students' union] and vice presidents need before they go into any of those meetings. If there's been a history of trying to power play in a committee or anything, the new Executive needs to know that. Students' union staff must have that information to pass down. (2763-2767)

However, this mentorship relationship does have an end where the Executive member must take ownership and responsibility:

They're there to guide and support you and do often do research for you, but at the end of the day a lot of this comes down to you as the Executive, as the vice-president, as the president. You're going to have to put in the work. At the end of the day it's your name it's your legacy.... (2855-2858)

Although staff members were seen to have good intentions, one Executive member believed they could be a bit "disconnected from students" at times, and that they could act paternalistic towards the Executive (2998). Regardless, the students'



union staff was given almost universal reverence among both students' union and administration participants.

**Operations.** Students' union participants largely spoke of their staff in an operational capacity within the students' union. Participants pointed to the staff taking care of the day-to-day organizational responsibilities, and enabling them to focus on the mandates on which they ran for election

about issues of the day-to-day management of our operations, or the building or stuff like that. Certainly I wouldn't want to be included in every one of those conversations, it's not why I ran. (5265)

It was clear these staff members had a specific role due to certain limitations in their ability to connect with the student body:

They're very disconnected I find in what students are talking about, are looking for, are in need a lot of the time. I mean that with absolutely no disrespect. I think I have one of the best management teams in the country after looking and visiting a lot of other students' unions. They do a great job administering this building and our businesses and our tenants and our operations. (2998-3002)

Student participants felt their staff ran the most important parts of the organization to their membership.

**Power.** University administrators and Executive members spoke at length about power and how students access and use power. Power as a concept is woven into every section of this chapter, but this section provides an overview of how administrators and Executive members perceived student power on campus. A lot of

the discussion that surrounded power was in relation to the formal seats Executive members held on university governance bodies. Administrators were quick to express value for the roles student members play on these bodies, while Executive members talked more about feeling like tokens on those bodies. Executive members instead saw their power stemming from passing the legitimacy test needed to form relationships with administrators with authority to enact their election platforms. This was, if the Executive member even needed the university's involvement in fulfilling their promises to membership.

***Source of the students' union's power.*** The students' union sourced power from a variety of places. Participants discussed the influence the students' union Executive can win through their involvement with the collegial governance system and the informal relationships that were discussed earlier in this chapter. Other sources of power included: formal relationships and hierarchical structures such as through control of the agenda; the ability to frame issues and conversations; experience and knowledge; control of information resulting in an "information asymmetry" with university administration holding most of the power (3626); and, emotional/social intelligence. Administration participants recognized that the students' union had power in their ability to mobilize students around a specific issue.

Power related to informal relationships Executive members foster with the university needed to be both respected and acknowledged by university administration to have any real affect, and this was largely determined by the personality of those in leadership positions. Administration participants recognized

the outcome of their relationships with Executive members as “powerful” (1203), and the main route students can hope to achieve authority within the university: “those are ways the students and the students’ union can create change, and it’s not from confrontation. It’s more through networking, personalities, relationships, relationship building ... [that] influence [is won]” (952-954). Both groups acknowledged the impact the personality of the Executive can have on the amount of power the students’ union was able to accumulate.

Students’ union Executive members felt very strongly that respectful informal relationships with university administrators were the key to getting things done in office:

I come from activism. I grew up in activism. That’s how I was raised from my teenage years to now, I think. There’s a time and a place for activism, like radical activism... But I think that a lot more can actually be accomplished through respectful positive and collegial discussions. I remember walking into a meeting with an administrator ... and talking about what she was doing that weekend, she was travelling, so we were travelling and I was giving her advice as to where she should go, and then spent the next hour arguing with her in the committee meeting. We left, and I gave her the address for the place. We have strong relationships and we very much disagree about the direction of the university at some points, but without that respectfulness and collegiality then it’s just petty bullshit. (5636-5646)

It is interesting to note this same participant recognized how their tactics may be interpreted by more radical students:

I think it's important to note that doing all of this would get us labeled as sell outs by a constituency of people. I think that's just important to note. That there are two schools of thought, and I think one is growing substantially from nothing, that idea that oppositional politics should rule and we're trying to do radical things and change the university in a way that isn't respectful or collegial or all those sorts of things. That's important to note and watch for the future of students' unions. (5672-5678)

A more thorough discussion of the intricacies of these relationships can be found earlier in Chapter Four.

Many members of administration spoke at length about the role Executive members have within the governing structures of the university. They saw this role as enabling students to have influence and power within the university.

In that way they have as much power or influence as everyone else sitting on that committee or council. No one that I'm aware of that has said 'I'm a faculty member and my vote is worth more than yours as a member of council representing faculty. (767-770)

Most of the administration believed faculty members respected the students' union, which then gave the students' union power within the university. However, one administrative participant felt faculty do not take students as seriously because they lack experience, do not have a doctorate, and are quite young:

...they're not really viewed as having the same influence or impact as a faculty member just because they tend to be in their position one or two years.. they have to get their feet wet in the first year, and if they're going to be here in the second year they might be able to get a little traction and influence, but it's very difficult. I think it's very important they're here at the university, but I don't see them as having as much as an influence as they should have. It's not really a triumvirate at this point; it tends to be administration, faculty, and then in some areas there's sometimes some influence from the students' union. But not as much as they should. (85-92)

Students' union participants reported that they felt listened to on committees—when conditions are right. When the correct individuals were in the room, one students' union participant reported that s/he was given more deference than other committee members:

If you get the right person in there [chairing a university governance body], the students' union representative actually has more power than many of the other committee members. I think we're almost seen as having a broader perspective because we don't come from a disciplinary department or whatever, just different, unknown, novel... So if we can say what we have to say with even a little bit of interest or flair, then they'll not mind listening to us! (5512-5517)

Lastly, one administrator spoke of how students' union Executive members influenced the university when they are unable to work with university administrators:

They achieve their goals by working closely with the university administration when they can. When that fails, they work at the political sphere with the President and with the politicians of the day. If they don't like what the governing party is doing, they can also go to the opposition, but it's a political job. They try to achieve what they can through the organization that supports them, meaning the [students' union's] organization, and if that's not working they go through other means. They lobby, they gather momentum, go to the media which is a tool they often use... sometimes the media can be the stick and sometimes a carrot works better with university administration. (1833-1840)

***Legitimacy test.*** Students' union representatives had to pass a *legitimacy test* for access to the power base residing in their relationships with university administrators. In this sense, they have to almost "transform from an undergraduate into a pseudo-mini administrator," which made the students' union participant who said this "cringe" (3113-3114). This legitimacy test was presented as a difficult hurdle to overcome at the beginning of their terms:

whether we like it or not we are often playing by their rules in their house, and I think that's often taken for granted by the university. They don't really appreciate or realize the work that it takes and that we put in to have the view as legitimate. (3071-3074)

The student's union participants argued that the students' union and university administration have different realities, and while the Executive had to learn how to operate within the world of university administration, they felt it was unlikely university administration will take the time to learn the students' union world.

Administrative participants did not deny the existence of a test, but believed it to be a normal process within any organization. "When you're dealing with senior administration in any organization, you are being put through a test no matter who you are" (2369-2371). One administrator took exception to this argument, and believed administration had a responsibility to "take students at face value" and "especially ones that are in representative roles" (2092-2093). This participant found it difficult sometimes to discern if what the Executive member is advocating for is,

a representative concern that they're bringing to the table, or is this a personal issue that they're bringing to the table? What hat are they wearing? Are they wearing their 'I'm a student in the department of psychology and this is my interest' [hat], or 'I am the VP of the students' union and therefore representing broader interests?' (2092-2099)

Even here, power was earned and not given to the students' union. This point will be discussed in-depth in the subsequent section on the students' union and university relationship.

**Politics.** The student's union saw the university as a political system, and the students' union as a political organization. They felt that university administration

did not see the university as a political system, and that administrators are wary of making decisions that could be political:

If you never look at it from that side, you will never understand what is going on. There are some administrators that really get it, and then there are others that think of everything as being cold, bureaucratic, mechanistic business. Those are the people who are out to lunch. (3388-3391)

Administrators saw certain parts of the university as political, including senior administration—such as, the President, Vice-Presidents, Provost, and Deans—the different levels of government, and the students' union (1547). The university existed within this political world, but administrators did not deem themselves as political or taking political approaches to their work. Instead, they viewed their role as discussed in the beginning of this chapter: as professionals, civil servants, and bureaucrats. However, they admitted that they have a lot of power, which they presented as vital to the running the university.

The federal and provincial government's influence within the political reality of the university provided a useful illustration of internal dynamics within the social context of the institution. Government provided the university with the bulk of their operating budget and assists students with their education through the provision of loans and grants. Both the federal and provincial governments have a financial stake in higher education even though it is within provincial jurisdiction as outlined in the *Constitution Act, 1982*. Regardless, both administrative and students' union participants believed it was the role of the opposing group to lobby the government



for more funding for the university. One administrator framed it as an issue of power and ability:

I think there is a role for the students to provide their voice whether they think the funding is appropriate or not to the province. We as administrators can't go to the province and say if it's appropriate or not, because we just have to make it work. But the voices of the faculty and the students are two independent voices. (1241-1245)

This data was shared with the students' union participants in the interpretive panel.

One reaction was:

I think it's funny that [administration believes] the student can do things administration can't, such as lobby the government for more money. Is our university not lobbying the government for more money? I don't go to the Minister of Finance and say 'give the university more money.' I don't even say that to the Minister [responsible for universities] necessarily. I talk about projects that are important to students, the things that I was elected on that I have promised to deliver for students, but making sure the university gets it's 2 per cent increase is not one of them. That's the university's job! It's the Board's job, the President's... these people who hold these roles with government. And why would the government listen to... I just think our political capital isn't as high on issues like university finance than this portrays it to be. (5424-5433)

This student believed the power to be in the hands of administrators and governance. This is in direct opposition to where administrators believed power to

be located for government lobbying. Another participant was concerned the university was not talking to government about funding levels:

we need to be better advocates for what we do at the university and what we do is valuable, because why is the technical college getting more money? Well it's because of a philosophical approach in our country's priorities, and yea! You do have to advocate for yourself because your value is not obvious. And it's like they're just starting to figure that out and that concerns me because I want the people advocating for my education to be around. So, do it please, because I'm not going to. (5433-5440)

**Term lengths.** Students were in their Executive positions for one-year terms, providing a nearly constant annual turnover in leadership. They had the opportunity to run for re-election, but in general most Executive members are new each year. Administration participants felt this constant turnover in leadership harmed their ability to carry out their mission. This constant turnover was argued to result in shifting missions and priorities within the students' union, and made the creation and maintenance of relationships more difficult. Due to these short-term lengths and the regularly changing leadership within the students' union, both groups of participants agreed that the personality of the incoming Executive dictated and influenced their relationship with university administration. This would make personality an important variable to consider in the inter-organizational relationship. Lastly, students' union participants argued the impact of personality was not limited to the students' union; personalities in administration

and governing positions impacted campus dynamics and how much influence and power the students' union can collect and use.

Due to these short terms, the students' union participants identified time as a considerable limitation.

I need time. I need time to be able to be good at my job. I've talked to so many former presidents, and they often say to me '...I have no idea what I was doing until October.' Looking back, yes, wow, that is a very real thing. By then you're half done, even though the school year has just begun. I go back and forth on this a lot. One year, it's hard to make change in one year... I think that students' unions need to have a really hard conversation about our terms and the length of our terms, and if we're doing our membership any service by being in this position for a very short amount of time. (2771-2780)

The length of their terms meant these student leaders had to rely others, such as university administration and the students' union bureaucracy, to carry out their legacies. Administration also felt these short term-lengths limited the student's ability to become professionals, which resulted in stunting their effectiveness in their positions.

On a journey to become professionals, we have to start as amateurs. The question I would ask myself with respect to this one is, are we giving our students' union Executives sufficient time to become professionals at their job, or are they always going to be enthusiastic amateurs. And if they're enthusiastic amateurs it doesn't mean they're not doing good

work; they're just inefficient. A professional would do it faster... I'm just not sure that [students] have that legitimate opportunity within a one year term. (2404-2415)

Other administrators echoed this sentiment, focusing on both the positive and negatives that youth and inexperience brings: "Youth is a double edged sword too. On one hand they have more enthusiasm and exuberance, but it's not based on experience. And I'm not saying that critically. That's life!" (2104-2106). One administrator passionately argued that students have enough experience to have a voice, as "they do have an experience; it's their own experience, it's the student experience" (129-130), but that some within the campus community might not recognize this experience as valid and important. As a result, this administrator argued "they have to get their feet wet in the first year, and if they're going to be here in the second year they might be able to get a little traction and influence, but it's very difficult" (86-88). Every administrative participant suggested multiple-year terms, albeit in different forms, as the solution to many problems within the students' union, including legitimacy and ability to be effective. The general argument was "they're just starting to learn their job when it's over. Unless they're actually renewed through an election, you're losing all of that investment in people" (1288-1289). However, one administrator pointed out a potential benefit to only having people on the Executive in one year terms; if the Executive member did not have good ideas or were generally ineffective and difficult to work with, "well we just hope it's a one year term" (893).

Student participants found the opinions of administrators about their ability to be effective to be “dismissive” as “[i]t’s not that we don’t accomplish things, it’s that the scale of things we can accomplish is lower for most Executives” (5292-5294). They made a point of recognizing their “defensive” (5308) response to these ideas from administration. Instead of viewing the short terms as restricting what the students’ union is capable of accomplishing, this Executive member urged a more nuanced approach when reviewing the accomplishments of one year. S/he suggested administration is not privy to much of what the students’ union does, as a large portion is internal to the students’ union. S/he stressed that, “there isn’t going to be the same docket of urgent high status issues that have to be dealt with every year. Some Executive positions can filled by a good manager. If you’re a good manager you’ve done your job well. You don’t have to make sweeping changes every single year; that’s chaotic rather than helpful” (5312-5315). They worried how this belief of Executive members as young and inefficient impacted the legitimacy of the organization in the eyes of administrators, as they understood how that opinion might be formed. One student participant cautioned that “every once in awhile someone shows up here who is on par or exceeding the vast majority of people they come across over there, and that gets threatening and a lot of people will not acknowledge that” (5042-5044). They found the experience of being elected to the students’ union as a very steep learning curve, but that by the end of the first academic term (August) or at least by October they had their roles and positions figured out enough to speak authoritatively and ask for change.

Regardless of what participants believed was the best way of managing the term lengths, most agreed that the university needed to ensure initiatives Executive members begin are seen through. These were the student's "legacies", as "one thing can take multiple years" (2421). Another administrator took this idea further, and expressed concern when they thought these legacies were being forgotten: "...those priorities [of the SU Executive] should be identified to us, because it can still be part of your [the Executive's] legacy" (1417-1418). The students' union as well looked to the university to continue their legacies: "by working with the administration they're more permanent here, so that change can take place beyond our terms" (4532).

**Students' union and university connections.** While the Executive saw themselves as separate entities who had relations with the university, university administration conceptualized the students' union as part of a larger singular university community. This impacted how participants interpreted the relationship between the students' union and the university administration. Many of these quotations and themes need to be understood in context with the rest of the data. While there may be instances where conflict enters into their relationship, most interactions were perceived by participants to be respectful and positive. This was corroborated with observational data.

The students' union was integrated into the governance structure of the university and relied on the university to facilitate its existence. The students' union was seen by most members of the administration to be part of the university like any other unit on campus. The Executive perceived the students' union to be

autonomous from the university, enjoying an “arms length relationship” through which the university administration facilitated their existence (2754).<sup>5</sup> Student participants considered the students’ union a separate entity that came together with the university when interests aligned. The Executive focused more on the differences between the students’ union and university administration, arguing that, “we have some very different realities and very different people that we have to be accountable to; different priorities” (2589-2590). They believed that ultimately the two groups had different audiences and accountabilities, creating implicitly different mandates and organizational focuses.

***Mandate.*** Administrators saw the missions of the university and students’ union as overlapping, aligning, and complimentary to each other. Administration perceived that “we don’t live in separate worlds. We work together” (1680-1681). Another administrator believed the university still existed in a siloized state, and that the university should have a mandate closer to that of the students’ union: “In some ways I wish we were more aligned with the students’ goals... Other departments might not be as aligned, and then you’ll have a divergence, and that’s why you need a strong students’ union so their voices aren’t lost in other concerns” (372-380).

One administrator believed that it is possible for the students’ union and the university to have different mandates and goals, as the University Senate might have

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<sup>5</sup> The students’ union was reliant on the university to collect and distribute their membership fees, to communicate with their members, and in relation to their building as the university technically owns the students’ centre, which was originally paid for by the students.

different priorities than the students' union, which leads to different missions between the university and students' union.

It's possible the university, if it's a research-intensive university, might have goals that are different from the students. My own personal philosophy is that should be our mission; our mission should be to educate these students. In some ways I wish we were more aligned with the students' goals. (370-373)

Although the students' union fundamentally believed they had a different mandate and mission than the university this did not preclude the two groups working together. The students' union and the university had some common interests, and Executive members saw those interests as fantastic opportunities to work with the university. But, one Executive member cautioned against that being part of one larger purpose: "I see us in different places and when there's purpose to do so or benefits to our students we can converge and work together. But that is not at all where we're starting from; we exist to not be the university" (5464-5467). Although the students' union fundamentally perceived their mandate to be different and separate from the university's, it did not limit their ability to collaborate when interests align.

***Students' union and collegial governance.*** The students' union at this university was part of the structures and processes of the collegial governance system. They were "embedded into the University's decision making structure" which one administrator believed was "rightly so" (1560-1561). Engagement within the actual decision making structures was critical to the continuation of their strong



relationship. In practical scenarios, the students seemed to be considered part of the university community. Both students' unions have reserved time on the agenda of collegial governance meetings, and most of the time they presented highlights from their organization, such as election results or important campaigns. Employees of the students' union were also engaged at some of these meetings. For example, the university delegated explanation of a new university wide policy that was up for consideration to an interest group within the students' union. This level of trust and integration was extended into other spaces as well. In a COS meeting, when asked a question about university services, the University President deferred to the students' union President to provide the information.

***Students' union reliance on university.*** Student and administrative participants believed the university facilitated the students' union's existence in many ways. For example, the students' union was reliant on the university to collect their membership fees that comprised most of their revenue, and the university owned the building that housed the students' union offices and much of their revenue sources. As one student participant explained, "I don't view the university as my master, but to a certain extent it's the reality" (3091-3092). This went as far as the application of university policy onto internal students' union operations: "university policy should be applied to the students' union just like any other individual or organization on campus" (5477-5478). Another student participant said that while the university and the students' union exist separately, at some point they do "bleed together" (3338).

The students' union, to a large degree, operated under the supervision of the university. This power dynamic was witnessed throughout the period of observation for this dissertation. The university changed policies around the collection and establishment of student fees, and as a result, the students' union and a third-party service provider had to radically change how they conducted business. The university in this case not only affected how the students' union operated, but also how the students' union operated with independent third parties.

***Accountability to the university.*** The students' union had accountabilities to the university due to the facilitative function university administrative and governance played for the students' union. Both groups were challenged to identify when the university would have a legal or moral obligation to interject in students' union business. Neither presented the students' union as completely independent of the university; there was a point where the university had a moral and legal responsibility for and over the students' union, but participants had different ideas as to where this line is drawn. Administrative participants largely spoke within a larger context of university policy and students' union autonomy:

If it's a risk to the university, if it's a risk to students, if it's contravening laws or university policy, if we have a fiduciary or legal or statutory obligation to step in then we step in...through legitimate formal mechanisms. (1913-1916)

Legitimate formal mechanisms included the Board of Governors withholding students' union fees if there were concerns of financial impropriety. Another

administrative participant held a similar view, but focused the context around the independence of the students' union:

I would agree very much that they are autonomous. To a point. If student politics is getting to a point where it's becoming damaging to the university, damaging to the students themselves, I think the university has an obligation to step in, but very carefully without impeding the independence of whatever body it is. (2221-2225)

One method identified to 'step in' was the provision of resources to the students' union to facilitate certain initiatives. Administrative participants believed the university should provide resources to the students' union to ensure they practice good governance and proper financial practices, but that

[w]e should not determine the agenda. But we should determine that there is a structure in place to make sure there are no improprieties going on. We want to make sure proper audits are done, that referendums are carried out in a legitimate fashion. We should oversee the governance of it, but not the agenda. (557-560)

One administrative participant argued that if the students' union were to get into trouble and made a bad decision, university administration and/or governance would believe "we're in it too!" (935-936). Another administrator considered the students' union a central part of campus, going as far to call them a part of administration:

Students play a role in administering things on campus, so the students' union as an example administers the health and dental insurance, the bus

pass, and the extra curricular activities and groups that are sponsored through the students' union. It also administers the voice of the students back into the university. (1123-1126)

The students' union participants restricted the involvement of the university to specific circumstances:

the university's responsibility ends where its accountability ends. So it's not accountable for the decisions that we make, the actions that we undertake. To a limited extent they are for events and insurance and their facilities. (4384-4386)

They recognized the existence of a power asymmetry between the students' union and the university, and the realistic implications for the students' union. Student participants were not resentful of the university's potential power over their organization; it was accepted simply as their reality.

*Mentorship.* Students learn how to operate within the university administration's world through several mechanisms and practices, such as mentorship. Both the students' union and university administration believed that administrators have a large role in providing this mentorship. An administrative participant saw this as the responsibility of the campus community as a whole, and argued that, "There has to be a mentorship, an advice or mentorship role that more seasoned members of the campus can provide. It's not to mute or muffle. It's just to make sure that if we're going down a path that we've considered all angles" (1188-1191). An Executive member echoed this

...the university can provide some mentorship. Of course there has to be an arms length relationship at some times just so it doesn't look like either one is in the pocket of the other. But of course a lot of times this is the students' first introduction into administrative roles, and the university just needs to be aware of that. (2753-2756)

The university, much like other organizations, was complex and required a specialized knowledge to navigate. Due to their short terms in office, Executive members had to quickly learn the structures and relationships within the university.

***The university 'brand'.*** University administrators expected the students' union to uphold the reputation of the university. Although only one administrator used the term "brand," most believed the students' union Executives had a responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner that protected the university's reputation:

the university has a brand, and that brand dictates the value of the degree you've earned. The students' union has to play a role in promoting and protecting that brand, while making sure their concerns are getting heard. There's a level of responsibility that the students' union has to kind of temper the desire to make sure we're not negatively impacting the brand of the institution while we're trying to affect change. (1249-1253)

Not only does the students' union have a responsibility to uphold certain aspects of this brand, according to administration, but tactics used by the students' union also needed to be respectful. For example, "[s]ometimes there are comments that are

maybe made to the media that can impact in a negative way the overall branding and mission of the university” (1278-1279). One university participant felt a personal connection to the responsibility of the students’ union to buy into and promote the brand of the university:

I have three degrees from this place. They’re sitting right behind you on the wall. Those three things are only valuable if the brand of the University of [...] is perceived to be valuable by the world...So if I’m constantly throwing rocks at my Alma Mata, I could potentially start to devalue it rather than add value. Whereas if I’m working within the structure itself, my potential to add value might be greater, but it might take me longer to do it. It’s a trade-off. At what point do you start devaluing the brand because you’re trying to add value to the approach, versus the other way around. (2390-2400)

One students’ union participant reacted angrily in the interpretive panel when reviewing administration data that spoke of the students’ union responsibility to protect the university’s brand:

Nope! Nope! Nope we don’t. We do not have that responsibility, to protect their brand. Like maybe if they used a different word, like integrity of reputation, or that we have a standard to uphold... I think they see us starting from the same place and diverging when things get bad. But I see us in different places and when there’s purpose to do so or benefits to our students we can converge and work together ... So specifically the word brand, reputation, or image, that’s not what I’m

about here. This part about responsibility to make sure the SU is following standard practices, I do think that's important, and in as much as it's a practical corollary effect on universities because of the students' union. University policy should be applied to students' unions just like any other individual or organization on campus. (5460-5478)

Students' union participants felt they had a different understanding of the university's brand and largely felt they had no responsibility to uphold the brand in the manner the university defined. Another student participant exclaimed "I don't have a responsibility to protect the brand of the university. I was a part of really tarnishing it" to which the first Executive member added, "That's how you get stuff done!" (5467-5468).

***Independent, external relations.*** Much of the students' union's work was conducted separately from the university and they maintained a large network external to the university. One participant argued, "the relationship between the student's union and University is external relations. It very much works that way. We have very defined territory, very defined responsibility" (3325-3327).

Additionally, students' union participants, supported by observations made in COS meetings, talked a lot about external partners other than the university. For example, the students' union interacted with multiple levels of government, health and dental insurance providers, in addition to dozens of individuals and businesses needed to operate the students' union building and other services. These relationships were conducted largely independent of the university. When presented with

administrative data that suggested the students' union should be more integrated into the university, student participants argued that the students' union is

[a]n advocacy organization. I just think it [integrating the students' union more into the university] goes exactly opposite to what we're trying to do here... I want to lobby the university, I want to work with the university, I don't want to work for the university. (5320-5322)

When asked if the students' union and the university have the same interests at heart, one student participant reflected on her/his role within the university:

Students' unions wouldn't really exist as such if it weren't for the layer of administration that makes decisions about students, just like an employees union doesn't necessarily exist as such when there isn't an employer. And a government opposition doesn't exist without a government. (3993-3996)

This same participant saw the engagement of the students' union within university governance as just a deviation from the norm: "I kind of see where the puzzle is in that. I as a student representative end up sitting on Senate committees. But maybe why that's conspicuous is because we're separate organizations. Our autonomy is pretty important to the whole function" (4001-4003). The students' union was seen to be "just different" from the university (4175).

Students' union participants expressed a desire to be a partner with the university in a relationship of equality and cooperation. The Executive wanted to be a partner not just in student issues, but also on campus issues as they felt a part of the university and wanted to participate in the community. One student participant



argued that they “have actual ideas about how things should be done, and not just when they relate to our lives directly” (5256-5258). However, students saw a power imbalance between the students’ union and the university, where it should be a “partnership of equality” (3078).

**Disconnections.** There were several instances identified by participants where reality did not match expectations or rhetoric. After being elected, many students’ union participants found many of their preconceptions about university administration and the university were inaccurate. These same participants also pointed to a few instances where they saw university administrators as disconnected from the reality of the university.

***Misconceptions of student executives.*** Many students’ union Executive members entered their positions with large misconceptions about the motivations and realities of university administrators. They noted that meeting members of the university administration was a “disarming” experience. They said that contrary to their earlier beliefs, they found administrators to be people who, generally, want the best for the university and are generally friendly and reasonable (2730). Other students on campus shared these beliefs, according to one Executive member:

Contrary to popular belief, university administrators don’t actually want to screw us over, most of the time, and so they actually do a pretty good job of trying to figure out and then work for the best-case scenario.  
(3946-3948)

Once students’ union Executive members discovered this misconception, they could build the respectful and quality relationship described earlier in this chapter.

Another misconception student participants had prior to being elected was that the University President had a significant amount of power and influence on campus. One student' union member was "taken aback" upon this realization as they "thought they did everything. I thought that they were the boss, and that I'd be talking to them directly about how we make this [initiative] happen" (2808-2010).

One reason offered for the existence of these misconceptions was that people with little practical experience run for positions on the Executive committee of students' union, and as such they are unaware of the realities of the university and its administration. This participant argued that it set the students up to have a lot of misconceptions when they do find themselves in office.

When presented with these misconceptions administrators were not surprised:

We try to keep a lean shop, so there's not a whole lot of time to get out and socialize and talk with the community, and we probably need to prioritize that a bit more so we don't have those misconceptions. (2299-2303)

Other administrators were pleased these misconceptions had been righted, but were concerned that other students and members of the university community held these same views.

***Administration was disconnected.*** While student participants spoke about how their own misconceptions were quickly resolved, they also identified multiple disconnections in the administrative participant's data between actions and philosophy. Student participants were not surprised when presented with the

administration word cloud of the term *University*. They felt that through rhetoric administration was presenting an image, and not reality:

They're definitely trying to sculpt a certain image, and not that I'm saying the image they're trying to portray is very different from a certain reality of the university, but I would say it becomes more and more at home to talk about the image than maybe the concrete day to day...the question I have is what else is going on in these people's heads but also in the university that isn't represented here. I think the buzzwords we often here are not inaccurate, but our university is in a highly aspirational time and what we talk about has yet to be realized in a lot of cases. (5179-5192)

At times participants attempted to guess which administrators had provided which word in the graphic.<sup>6</sup> One participant felt the reliance on rhetoric was due to a communications specialist having trained administration well.

Alternatively, many administrative participants were surprised by the words in the students' union word cloud. After having reviewed the students' union data on the term *University*, one administrator was surprised that "some of our key strategic directions and visions" are not represented (2264-2266). From their perspective, this signalled a "disconnect between priorities between what the University is looking at from a senior leadership profile, and where the students actually see us" (2272-2273). Another administrator, when presented with the same word cloud found a different concern:

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<sup>6</sup> Confidentiality was maintained.

There's a word in there that troubles me a wee bit, and I'm not saying it's not true but it's something I try to get rid of, but they've seen it, and that's silo. It's not a big bold one, but it's there! (1960-1962)

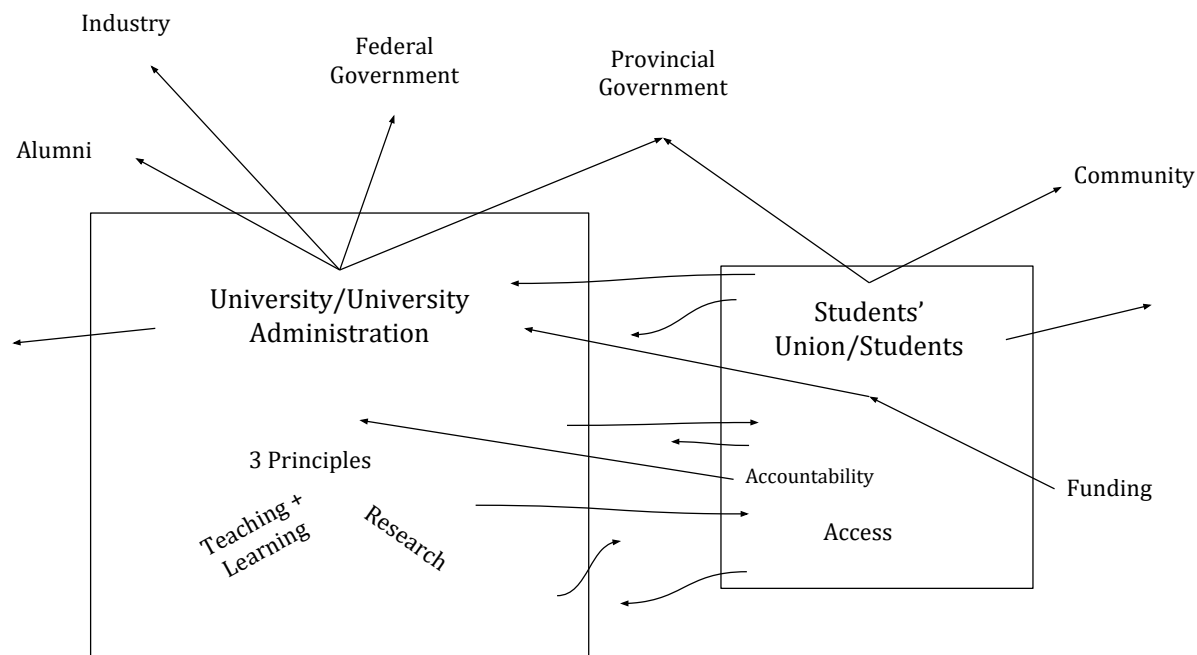
Another administrator expressed similar surprise at some of the words used by the students' union to describe the university administration:

It's funny because I think we're doing a lot of work to dispel a lot of the words in the administration one as well. We're trying to represent the university, to put structure around the university, but not to confine it—to allow it to grow. And this still feels a bit like it's top down confinement rather than promoting the capabilities of the university. (2290-2294)

### **Social Context of the University and the Students' Union**

As discussed in Chapter Three, all participants completed drawings of their understanding of how the students' union relates to the different parts of the universities. These drawings are explored individually, beginning with drawings from the students' union participants and then those from the university administration. These will be discussed more in-depth in Chapters Five and Six.

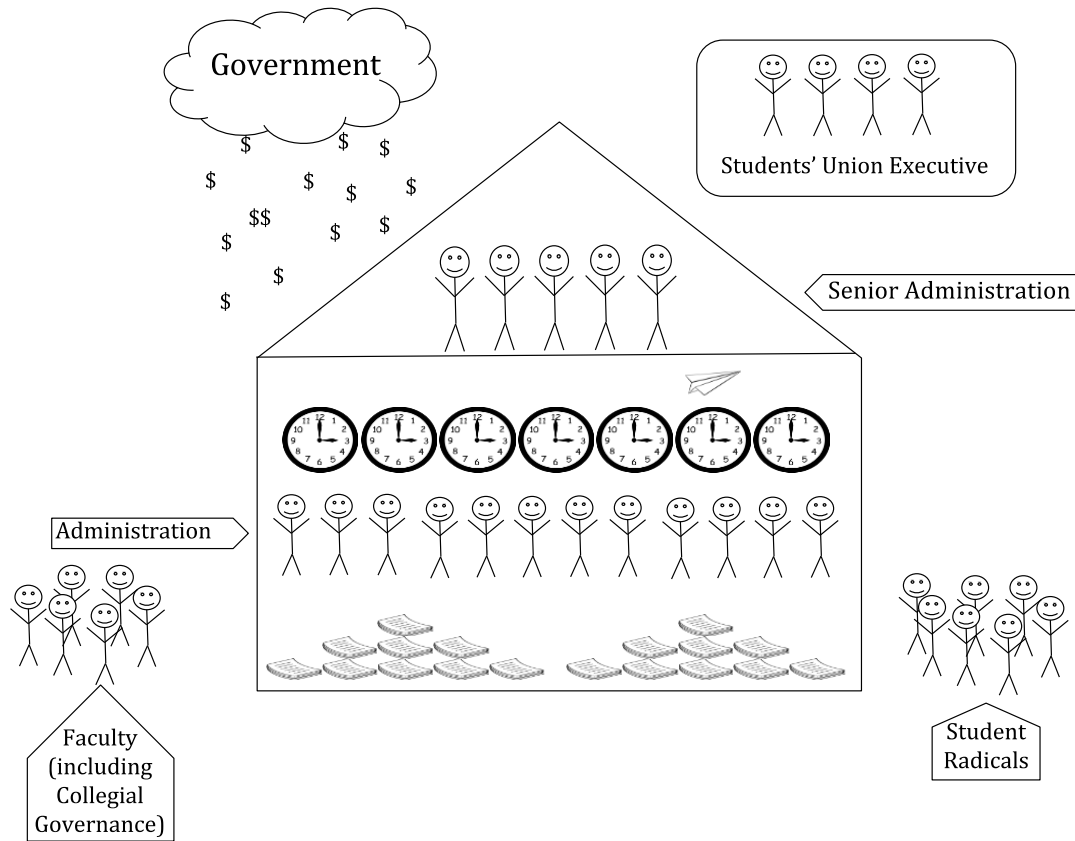
***Students' union drawings.*** Students' union participants completed three sets of drawings. These drawings are rich with information as they depict a nuanced and multi-faceted relationship with the university and its administration.



*Figure 4.1.* A students' union participant's depiction of the university and the students' union. Arrows represent relationships between groups and concepts.

*Figure 4.1* depicts the students' union and the university as separate entities. Both have a variety of stakeholders, such as Alumni, Industry, the Federal and Provincial governments, as well as the community, among others not listed which are represented though *Figure 4.1* as arrows emerging from the top of the university/administration and students' union/students with no stakeholder identified. Here, the university was responsible to more stakeholders than the students' union, but both were presented as stakeholders of the other's organizations. Funding, in the form of tuition and student fees, provided the students' union and the university with large portions of their operating budgets. The university, including the university administration, operated on three principles: teaching, learning, and research. The students' union's function here was

to advocate for student access to post-secondary education, as well as ensure the university and its administration remained accountable to the student body. There were more arrows exiting the students' union/students in the direction of the university/administration, as the students' union/students tried to form more connections than the university/administration. Many of these attempts to reach out were unsuccessful, and ended before they could reach the university/administration (as depicted through *Figure 4.1*, only two out of five arrows reached their destination). However, the university/administration had more success in their attempts at forming connections with the students' union/students (as *Figure 4.1* depicts only three arrows trying to form connections with the students' union/students, with one unable to bridge the gap).

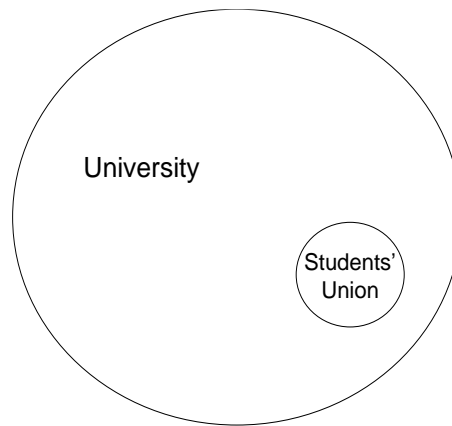


*Figure 4.2.* A students' union participant's depiction of the university and the students' union.

The drawing depicted in *Figure 4.2* breaks the university down into smaller groups who are presented as external stakeholders of the university. Students are divided into radicals and the students' union Executive. Faculty, including collegial governance structures, are also stakeholders and external to the central operation of the university, and faculty do not have significant interaction with student radicals or the students' union. These stakeholders can operate within very different value systems to that of the senior administration of the university.

Administrators are divided into separate groups in *Figure 4.2*, with power centralized within senior administration. Senior administration would include

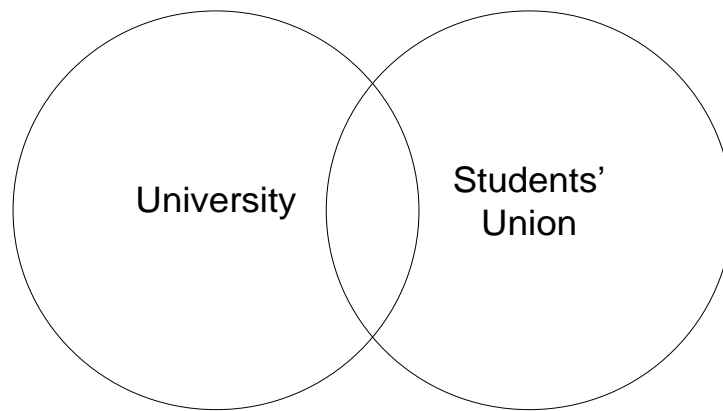
individuals such as the University President, Provost, Vice-Presidents, etc., with all other employees depicted as ‘Administration.’ These other employees are overburdened with work, as depicted through *Figure 4.2*, and do not have the time to provide leadership. Government is depicted as an external and nebulous entity that provides the university with funding.



*Figure 4.3.1.* A students’ union participant’s depiction of the university’s and the students’ union’s mandates.

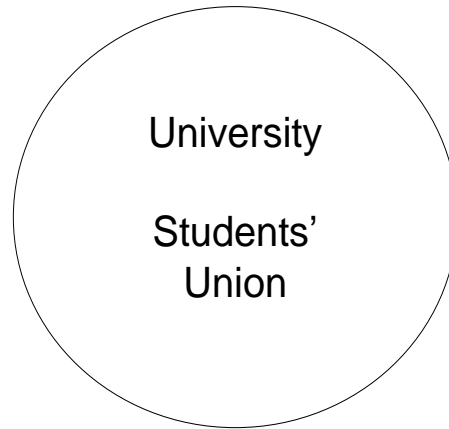
The third students’ union participant drew three separate diagrams to depict separate aspects to the relationship: mandate, interests, and values. *Figure 4.3.1* presents the mandate of the students’ union as a narrowed version of the university’s larger mandate. The students’ union still supports university ideals and they both have end goals that are compatible and shared.





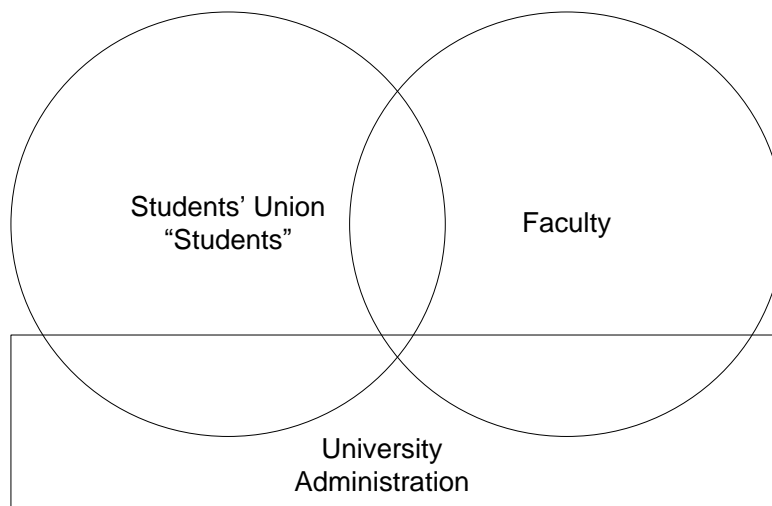
*Figure 4.3.2.* A students' union participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's interests.

*Figure 4.3.2* presents how the interests of the students' union and the university align. While the university and students' union are shown to have independent interests, there are large common areas of interest. Lastly, *Figure 4.3.3* represents the values of the students' union and the university, which are depicted to be the same. The participant was quick to elaborate that although s/he believed these values were the same, there might be different orderings of these values. For example, both the students' union and university value increased access for first generation students, but the emphasis and importance placed on that value might be different.

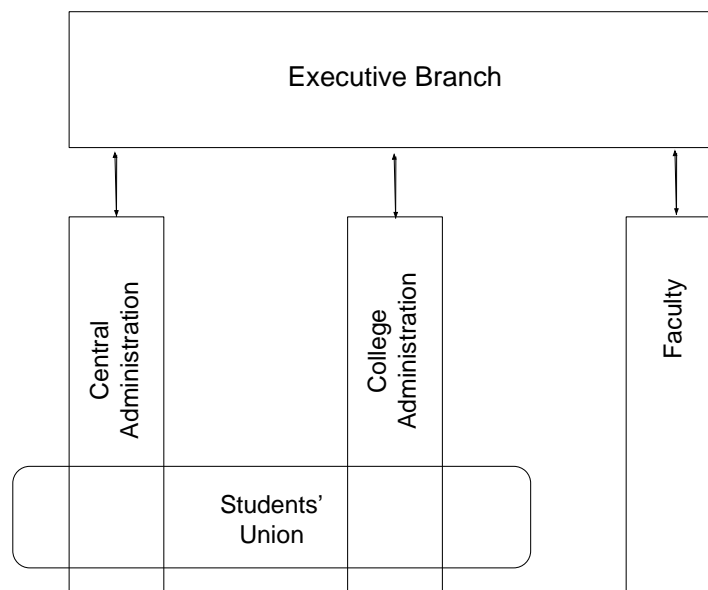


*Figure 4.3.3. A students' union participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's organizational values.*

***University administration drawings.*** Figure 5.1 depicts the relationship between the student's union and the university, which has been expanded to include faculty. There are exclusive interactions the students' union, depicted here to represent all students, has with faculty and university administration, but there are also spaces and times where all three converge and work together. The drawing in Figure 5.2 is similar in intent, but breaks university administration into smaller units such as the Executive Committee (equivalent to earlier definitions of *Senior Administration*), central, and college administration. Faculty is drawn out as an independent actor in this system, and students' union Executive members are thought to have the most interaction with the university through central and college administration.

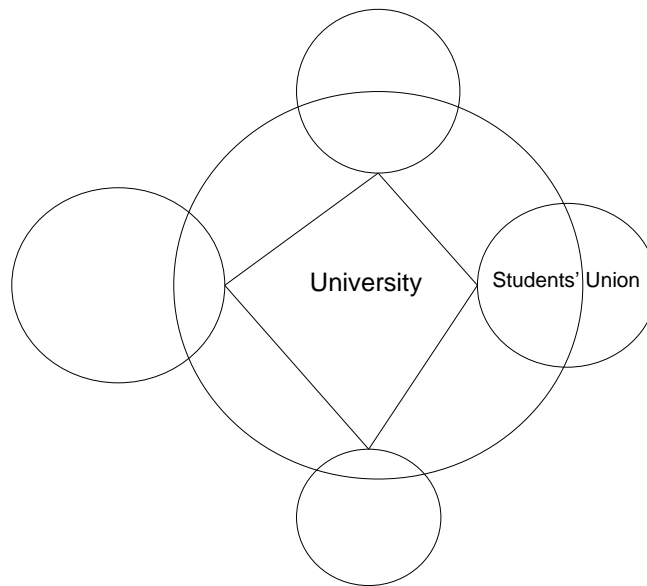


*Figure 5.1.* A university administration participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's relationship.



*Figure 5.2.* A university administration participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's relationship.

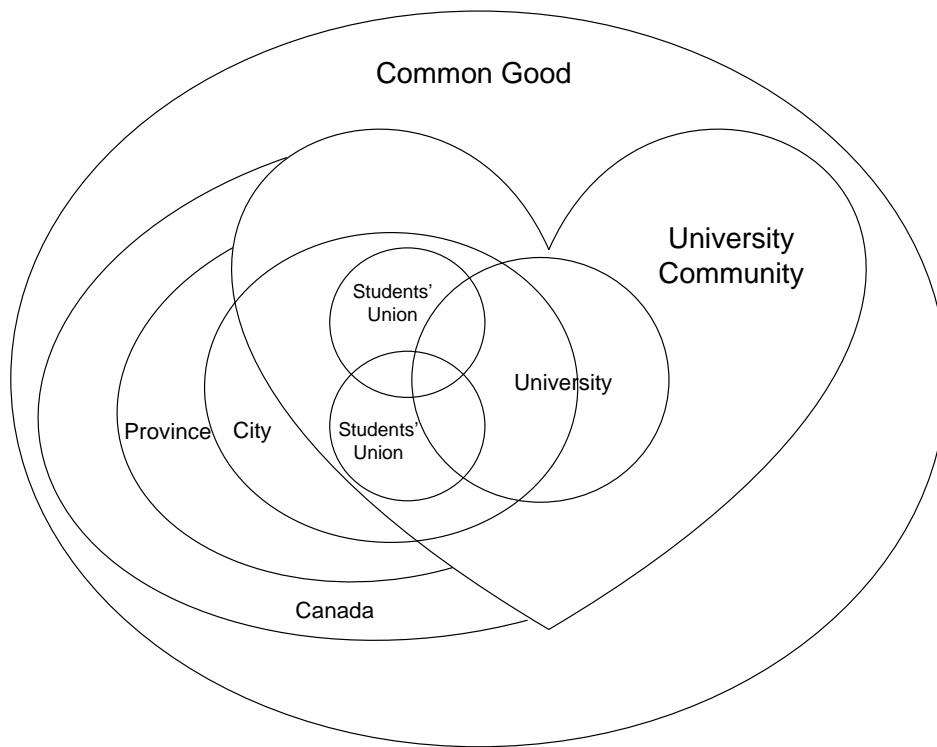
Figure 5.3 takes other student leaders into account. The students' union is presented as one group of students the university interacts with, and is the most internal to the circle that represents the university. The empty circles represent smaller groupings of students, including non-students' union associated student leaders and individual students who have varying levels of engagement with the university. The students' union, as it is shown as the largest circle, acts as the main community for students on the university campus, and as depicted has relationships within the university with other groups on campus.



*Figure 5.3.* A university administration participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's relationship.

Another participant saw the students' union and the university as part of a much larger social system, as represented through figure 5.4. The students' union

and the university operate within a larger context that includes the city and province in which they reside, but also a greater university community that exists to support the university. Figure 5.4 shows there are two students' unions on campus representing undergraduate and graduate students that have separate relationships with the university. These two students' unions also maintain relations with each other outside of the university sphere. Every actor depicted in figure 5.4 is motivated by a commitment to the common good. In this abstract sense, the students' union and the university have the same values and mission.



*Figure 5.4.* A university administration participant's depiction of the university's and the students' union's relationship.

**Discussion.** Student and administrative participants have presented understandings that are diverse and unique. Some commonalities run through most

the drawings, but with specific and important distinctions made. Student participants included a distinct nuance that was largely absent from many of the administrative participants' drawings. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 present the relationship amidst differential power dynamics. Figure 4.1 uses arrows to indicate the attempts made by the students' union and the university in forming relationships and influencing the other, with the students' union trying more often to create those relationships albeit unsuccessfully. Figure 4.2 positions the university as a 'house' whereby administration live and the students' union exists externally. The role of money presents an interesting perspective from the student participants; while Figure 4.1 depicts students as the financiers of the university, Figure 4.2 ties that power and influence to the government. None of the administrative drawings consider the influence of money or the unequal power relationship between the university and students' union as do two of the student drawings. Figure 5.4 does consider the larger social context that the students' union and university operates within, giving some recognition to the multiple stakeholders involved.

Almost all the drawings—administrative and student—depict more than just the students' union and the university; there are other actors involved in the relationship that participants felt needed representation. Faculty emerged as an important stakeholder, as reflected in figured 3.1, 5.1, and 5.2. Student participants were more likely to represent the different levels of government within their depictions, although figure 5.4 does present the university community as inclusive of the greater social and political context. University administration is presented in figured 3.2 and 5.2 as a complex entity itself; Figure 4.2 separates Senior

Administration from the rest of the university administration, while Figure 5.2 separates administration into three components: the Executive Branch, central, and college administration.

### **Summary**

These themes and their respective subthemes represent a method of organizing the data to aid in analysis. On their own, they paint a picture of a complex yet positive relationship between the participant groups. However, this picture has yet to come into focus due to the disagreements on some key points between the students' union and university administrative participants, and sometimes even within those two groups. The interpretivist framework for this dissertation enables all these realities to be true, which will be discussed more in depth in Chapter Five. There are several ideas that are common enough, and rich data in the areas of disagreement, to construct a basis to answer the research questions as presented in Chapter One.

In general, the students' union exists to provide representation and service to their membership, the undergraduate students. As was discussed previously, there is much disagreement about what exactly 'representation' entailed as an action, and who was the group being represented in those instances. This seemed to be one of the largest areas of contention, which encompassed issues of student tokenism and the role of student radicalism within the students' union. The service function of the students' union was recognized to be primarily carried out by the professionalized bureaucracy of the students' union, and the Executive Director was responsible for

most mentorship and guidance for these generally young and inexperienced student leaders.

Access to power and its use was another important yet contentious topic. While both student and administrative participants identified many similar power sources, it was clear there is disagreement surrounding how that power itself is actualized. University administration put a lot of emphasis on the role of the students' union on the university collegial governance structures while student participants rarely pointed to those structures to achieve their goals. Instead, relationships with university administrators were the primary vehicle for accessing power within the university. Administrators also recognized the importance of these relationships and even suggested some formalization to ensure students have access. Everyone interviewed for this project stressed the need for positive, respectful, and productive working relationships between the students' union and the university administration.

While both students and administration recognized the importance of positive working relationships between them, it became clear the nature and function of these relationships differ based on the participant. Student participants felt the students' union was more independent of the university than administrators tended to illustrate. While students recognized the students' union does have certain limitations due to their reliance on the university, physical location of their offices, and their inclusion in the collegial governance structures, they rejected a responsibility to protect a certain image of the university's reputation.

Administrators felt much more strongly that student leaders, and especially the



students' union Executive, represented a public face of the university. This brought a responsibility to uphold a certain 'brand' defined by collegial governance.

However, due to feelings of tokenism on those bodies, the students' union did not feel this particularly defined 'brand' was theirs to uphold.

As I continued through the iterative process of my data analysis, similar themes and ideas became present throughout. This research is meant to provide a deep and rich examination of the case study, which is why multiple tools and approaches were used in data collection. With similar themes coming from multiple sources, I found I reached saturation, and I could move forward with the research process. This chapter contained my attempt to present the data as matter-of-factly as possible within the meaning participants held. To reiterate, the use of my interpretations of their data is not to be construed as a 'bias' that should have been controlled for; my theoretical framework embraces the expertise my background provides, involved the participants in the interpretation of their data, and understands reality as the result of infinite perspectives that are constantly changing and evolving through social interaction. In the following chapter the data is further analyzed and I engage directly with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. This discussion will culminate in answering the research questions in Chapter Six, bringing an end to this research.

## **Reflection**

As a last note in this chapter, it was pointed out to me as I was discussing my research with friends that I sounded surprised to find these two had such positive opinions of the other; considering the semi-recent public conflict the campus had

gone through, through reflection I came to the realization I was *very* surprised. I was expecting to see antagonistic relationships. The nature of their relationship needs to be appreciated by the reader, as I do not think my surprise will be unique.

## **Chapter 5: The Process**

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organizations provide important services, including student representation within university governance structures and other supports, they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Even with the students' union's access to senior decision makers and inclusion in collegial governance structures, university leadership has limited ability to make decisions inclusive of students and cannot accurately gauge organizational politics (Baldrige, 1971; Tierney, 2008).

Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Schein's (2010) three levels of cultural analysis and Tierney's (2008) concepts in organizational culture in higher education, with attention paid to the role of power, conflict, and negotiation were used to supplement Baldrige's political model to create a more holistic framework for analysis. The three levels of culture, when

taken together, give a good idea of what that culture is; careful to not make too much out of artefacts and espoused beliefs; “many organizations [have] espoused values that reflect the desired behavior but are not reflected in observed behavior” (Schein, 2010; p. 27). The conceptual and theoretical framework is revisited in the chapter for ease of discussion.

In Chapter Four, I presented a complex, diverse, and sometimes-conflicting understandings of the role and purpose of the students’ union within the university. All these understandings are legitimate and help create the negotiated culture that created power systems within the university (Bates, 1982; Baldrige, 1971; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003).

Chapter Five presents an analysis of these diverse perspectives through a lens informed by the conceptual and theoretical framework detailed in Chapters Two and Three (Baldrige, 1971; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). The chapter is loosely organized according to Baldrige’s (1971) Political Model, with the first two stages used to examine the data: Social Context and Interest Articulation (p. 22). He argued that “an adequate conceptualization of university ‘politics’ depends on an accurate grasp of the university’s ‘social structure’ which is comprised of its formal systems, subcultures, and external environment” (p. 105). The students’ unions role within formal arena as a player with divergent and pluralistic goals.

Through this process, a picture developed of the university’s social world, and how power was granted to and accessed by the students’ union. Students were largely excluded from the formal systems of authority within the university, and instead relied on their capacity to use personal influence to assert power and affect

change. This was very exclusive access to university decision-making processes that no other student was privy. Radicals, as such, were not able to pass the university's legitimacy test by learning to operate within the university's cultural assumptions.

The information provided here is one perspective on the nature of this social world, and must be interpreted considering my story as a researcher and political citizen. Throughout the last decade, I have gained many unique lived experiences within university and student politics, making my perspective valuable in a topic area with a limited literature and research base. This document is not intended to be everyone's truth, but a particular perspective on something resembling truth within a framework with infinite versions of truth (Giddens, 1976).

On a side note, I struggled with how to present and analyse the data in a way that was meaningful and represented the purpose I was trying to accomplish with my research, which was one of the major pieces of feedback I received from my committee. It took a while to have confidence in my abilities and experience to move forward. I needed to live a little more to develop a fuller understanding of the world and how pieces fit together; or, perhaps I needed the confidence to admit *my truth* on paper. While I intellectually understood the outcomes of my worldview and of my research, I was unable to internalize what much of it meant for me emotionally. I received feedback on my first draft of this dissertation in late spring 2016, and it has taken until December to sit down and finish writing the beast. This, my friends, is what writer's block feels like.

Two events shaped my frame of reference in the six to eight months between receiving feedback from my committee and completing a final draft for defence: I

ran for Saskatoon City Council, and Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America. While these two events are seemingly independent, the growth I experienced could not have happened without the public nature of running for political office and being shaken to the core by the outcome of the American election. The time I took to reflect and process these new realities resulting in a much deeper philosophical understanding of my research and how it fits into the larger world. Since the successful defence of this dissertation and research concluded in late spring of 2017, I have continued to evolve as a researcher and a human being. I moved to Ottawa and began working for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada in the Children and Families Directorate, which was found to be violating Indigenous children's rights. There is a lot of learning in my future to be had.

### **Social Structure**

When looking at the university's social structure through a political lens, it is comprised of three major components: formal systems, divergent goals and the development of subcultures, and the external environment (Baldrige, 1971). Formal systems are ripe with artefacts and espoused beliefs, considering the concrete existence of bureaucracy and collegial governance systems. But, these artefacts and espoused beliefs are only part of the picture; we must consider basic underlying assumptions in how systems operate within a shared reality (Schein, 2010). Full truths are obviously beyond the capacity of this research endeavour as truth is by its nature temporally fixed (Giddens, 1984). Instead, I have outlined my perceptions of truths found within the shared reality of the students' union's Executive members

and their university administration counterparts. These are, then, basic underlying assumptions that I saw in their relationship, and I examine how those assumptions and realities are framed—or, are not—within current literature.

The Executive by its nature was excluded from bureaucratic authority structures, but they were integrated to a limited extent within professional authority structures. Due to this lack of access within the formal system, the students' union had a limited ability to participate in the continual negotiation and construction of the university's organizational culture (Bates, 1981; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). However, the students' union represented a subculture within the university, with independent goals and values. As the Executive did not interact within the formal systems of the university, these divergent goals and values rarely encountered the university's. These very different basic cultural assumptions between the students' union and their university counterparts were all legitimate and valid; they existed as part of the layered culture of the university. However, due to authority the university had over the students' union in several important areas they could dictate which layer of culture was enacted at a specific time. The students' union recognized this, which will be discussed in more detail later.

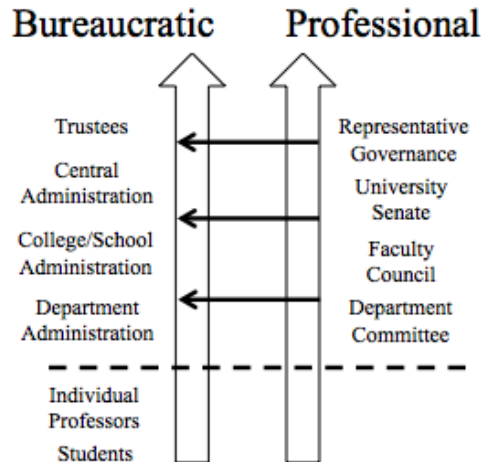
### **Formal Systems of Authority within the University**

The formal bureaucratic structures of a university are comprised of a parallel authority system around and through which actors exert their power and influence. The authority system—shown through Figure 1.3 and adapted through Figure 6—acts to organizing power and influence within the institution. These formal structures of an organization are cultural artefacts (Schein, 2010); alone, they tell us

little, but when paired with the organization's espoused beliefs and values, underlying assumptions can be identified. This parallel authority system theoretically enabled the whole university social system to be engaged in decisions, as students fought in the 1960s and 1970s for inclusion in collegial governance structures. Baldrige (1971) even hypothesized students would assume "a larger and larger role in the policy-forming councils of the university, and the dual parallelism that now exists between administration and faculty will be expanded to include students in significant ways" (p. 115).

As this section will show, the Executive were excluded from the bureaucratic power structures of the university, but were included within the professional authority structures of the university. Students were integrated into the university's governance system in a similar manner as faculty, as professional student representatives, which "gives [them] ready access, legitimacy, and points of pressure to penetrate the bureaucratic system" (Baldrige, 1971, p. 159). The Executive largely rejected collegial governance and the professional system of authority to achieve their goals, but they still filled the role, as they believed this voice for students—albeit insufficient—was critical to the operation of the university.





*Figure 6. Updated Parallel Authority Systems within the Political University. Adapted from *Power and Conflict in the University* by J.V. Baldrige, 1971.*

**Students' union and bureaucratic authority.** By not being bureaucrats within the larger university, the students' union had limited bureaucratic authority within the university (Baldrige, 1971). However, this does not mean the bureaucratic authority system was inaccessible in its entirety. The organization was a major service-delivery mechanism, seen through the students' union conceptualization of themselves in Figure 3.1 in Appendix I, and in university interviews. One university participant considered the students' union to be part of "administering things on campus" (1123), which translated into almost sovereign authority over matters like the physical students' union building, health and dental provisions, access to public transportation, parts of campus social life, and some responsibility over extra-curricular activities. The Executive had authority over these services by their own internal structures—as they were the Board of Directors for the organization and had ultimate control over its affairs—but any bureaucratic authority they had was delegated in practice to their own bureaucracy.

The students' union's bureaucracy provided leadership and mentorship for the Executive, but also maintained most organizational operations including students' union services. This bureaucracy was comprised primarily of paid professional staff members under the authority of the students' union Executive Committee, although there were some students on payroll as part-time employees. However, this authority was ultimately subject to university policies and processes, a reality that was observed through the data collection period.

**Students' union and professional authority.** Students were integrated into the university's governance system like faculty—as *professional* student representatives, which theoretically would give them “ready access, legitimacy, and points of pressure to penetrate the bureaucratic system” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 159). One Executive member and one graduate student sat on each university governance council and its committees, and each association reported publicly to each meeting of the University Senate.

University administration participants believed this inclusion was incredibly important to the wellbeing of the university, and believed in the power and centrality of collegial governance. However, student participants largely rejected the *professional* network to achieve their goals (Baldrige, 1971). Students felt their roles on collegial governance structures gave them little opportunity to carry out their mandates. The mandate of the students' union was flexible and changed from year to year as membership on the Executive Committee shifted as different people were elected. The Executive played a different role within the students' union than their bureaucracy; they were focused on achieving their goals as set out in their

election campaigns. The Executive of the students' union represented the needs of students as dictated through popular election yearly. Collegial governance simply operated too slowly, and in areas of potentially little interest to the individual Executive member. There was an understanding and recognition of the importance of these structures for the long-term function and efficacy of the institution, and student participants felt what role they did have was important and when they spoke people listened. However, this had little to do with their identity and purpose as individually elected members of the students' union Executive, and as such they rejected the efficacy of using these structures to achieve their goals.

Conversely, those in the professional leadership of the university also did not appear substantially concerned with the students' union, as most of their interaction was symbolic and for information only. The Council of Students was used by student leaders as a means to get important information to their membership about the university; actors from the professional authority structure did not attend these meetings and students' union leadership rarely mentioned these structures in reports. The relationship seemed more symbolic than to facilitate any discussion or collaboration.

In addition to not being suitable to achieve their goals, even though they had voting seats on these policy-forming councils many student participants reported feeling like tokens; influence was limited to their ability to appeal to the sensibilities of other committee members. They asked

if that [seats on university governance bodies] is a meaningful representation or if it's more just tokenistic... We're usually placed as the

only student representatives on large university committees and often if that committee is going to do something that isn't in the best interest of students our one vote can't stop them. (2550-2605)

Tierney (2008) argued that when students were included in collegial governance in the 1960s, "the point was to add a student or two to a committee, not to give the students a structural voice akin to a faculty senate" (p. 148). This seems consistent with the feelings of tokenism reported by multiple student participants.

**Discussion.** Baldridge's (1971) parallel authority structures are examples of artefacts within the university's organizational culture, as they are tangible structures that can be directly observed and studied (Schein, 2010). Bureaucratic authority is encoded in policies and representative governance is generally enshrined in provincial legislation. Many of these structures produce significant secondary artefacts, like minutes from meetings, holding meetings in the public arena, and publications. This was not restricted to the authority structures within the university; the students' union also had policies, meeting minutes, and publications that were artefacts used in this analysis. The students' union's artefacts, when considered in tandem with espoused beliefs and values, helped to understand if they were operating under different basic underlying assumptions than their university counterparts.

In relation to the parallel authority structures and how students are engaged, these artefacts can be considered two main ways: students are included within the professional authority system; and, students have limited inclusion within the professional authority system. When these artefacts are considered with the

espoused beliefs and values of all participants, we can get a glimpse of some of the assumptions that are being used and shared with other members of their groups (Schein, 2010).

Bureaucratic authority structures are by design inaccessible in a formal capacity to the students' union. This was clear from the artefacts, and was supported by most student and university participants. One administrator expressed a desire to bring the students into the bureaucratic structures in a more formal manner, but this was rejected out of hand by student participants in the interpretive panels. There are competing espoused beliefs surrounding the role of students and the students' union within university bureaucratic structures.

A sub-bureaucratic authority system existed within the parallel authority system (Baldrige, 1971), but was populated by the students' union bureaucracy, and was ultimately subject to university authority. The students' union bureaucracy had some limited authority over their own internal services, but this authority was ultimately dependent on university approval, tacitly or not. There was a belief from both student and university participants that the students' union was autonomous from the university, but that limits existed to that autonomy wherein the university would need to flex their power. This was observed throughout the research period, as the students' union had to significantly alter internal processes to satisfy a new internal university deadline. However, this process was accepted as normal by all participants, indicating their espoused belief in autonomy was more nuanced than originally presented. The university, including its administration, had legitimate capacity to influence students' union activities and processes (Baldrige, 1971).

There may have been a disagreement between the student and university participants about where the line was for the university to step in, but there was a common basic assumption that the university had that authority.

Executive members were included in the professional authority structures at the highest level: provincial government legislation. Every professional authority structure had at least one student representative and many times a separate representative for graduate students. This was an act that became commonplace after the 1970s, and Baldridge (1971) predicted that

[w]ithout a doubt the future will see students assuming a larger and larger role in the policy-forming councils of the university, and the dual parallelism that now exists between administration and faculty will be expanded to include students in significant ways. (p. 114)

Both student and university participants espoused a value in collegial governance and the professional authority structure. University administrators placed the utmost respect and had faith in collegial governance as a system to steer the metaphoric university ship, and students also presented the structure as important to the university. However, the Executive did not view collegial governance and the professional authority system as useful to achieve their mandates, and they lacked access to real authority within that system as they felt like a token representative. One or two seats on a committee of potentially over 20 representatives does not give students influence the conversation. This is consistent with Tierney's (2008) explanation that "the point was...not to give the students a structural voice akin to a faculty senate" (p. 148). These are competing espoused beliefs surrounding the

capacity of the professional authority system to adequately represent students of the students' union within the university bureaucratic structures.

According to student participants and one administrative participant these professional structures have very minimal access points for the Executive. One administrative participant echoed Tierney's (2008) sentiment, that students never received the kind of authority and access to power many had perhaps been envisioning during the student activism in the 1960s and 1970s:

I think it's very important they're [the students' union] here at the university, but I don't see them as having as much as an influence as they should have. It's not really a triumvirate at this point; it tends to be administration, faculty, and then in some areas there's sometimes some influence from the students' union. But not as much as they should. (85-92)

The students' union—and by extension students, as will be argued later—had extremely limited access to authority within the parallel authority structure of the university and thus students (Baldridge, 1971). There was a shared assumption in the importance of collegial governance structures making decisions and holding power within the university. What seems to have been missed, however, was the capacity for students to have real influence on these bodies. In this point, there was a gulf between most of the student participants and their university counterparts.

### **Plurality of Goals and the Creation of Sub-cultures**

The students' union represented a subculture of the university, which was part of a larger student culture that included other students and their leaders on campus.

While this fact became increasingly obvious as the research and writing process continued, Baldrige (1971) argued, “the description of the various subcultures is really not the critical point of the discussion. Instead, the primary concern is with the influence that these divergent groups have on the policy-making processes of the university” (p. 122). With this, I have not undertaken a detailed descriptor of the particularities of the students’ union’s subculture within the university; this in and of itself could be considered a major research project. Instead, I have examined how the students’ union—specifically the student Executive—operated within an unfamiliar and highly structured organizational culture.

The existence of a layered culture enabled Executive members to operate within the university’s world; different people had different understandings of the same concepts, which enabled and disabled the capabilities of their communication. These different frames are all still legitimate but with the inclusion of unequal power relationships this layering of culture is still unequal in its outcomes; the university, and its administration, had ultimate control over the students’ union and their conceptualization of the university social system firmly places the students’ union under the mission and ‘brand’ of the university.

**Fragmentation and divergent goals.** The university is “fragmented by divergent values and conflicting interest groups” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 16). Baldrige (1971) argued that “[m]any of the critical problems of governance are related precisely to the conflicting demands made by [subcultures]. Because of this fragmentation university governance often becomes negotiation; strategy becomes a process of



jockeying between pressure groups; ‘administration’ ever more becomes ‘politics’” (p. 122).

A helpful tool to explore the complexity of this discussion was the divergent views between university and student participants on the students’ union’s responsibility to uphold the brand of the university. University administrators expected the students’ union to uphold the university brand, as defined by collegial governance. As the students’ union was part of the university’s collegial governance structure and were part of the administration of the university, university administrators had an expectation that the students’ unions would uphold the vision and values of the university. This expectation was assumptive on the part of the university administration; they assumed the students’ union had the same goals and values as the university that was captured in the ‘brand’ of the institution due to their engagement within the collegial governance system. This brand can be seen in the espoused beliefs and values of the university administration, as well as in cultural artefacts (Schein, 2010). For example, Figure 3.1 depicts university participants’ perceptions of a university. The most prominent words include research, teaching, students, knowledge, and society, and these concepts were very like the goals and priorities of this specific university.

When administrators were presented with the word cloud depicting the students’ union’s view of a university—one that looked significantly different than their own, Figure 3.1—one administrator was worried that “some of our key strategic directions and visions” were not represented in the word cloud (2264-2266). From their perspective, this signalled a “disconnect between priorities

between what the University is looking at from a senior leadership profile, and where the students actually see us” (2272-2273). This brand was determined by the democratic structures of the university: the collegial governance system.

Student leaders largely rejected using collegial bodies to achieve their mandates due to feelings of tokenism and a lack of capacity for collegial structures to make the kind of change student leaders promoted. With limited ownership over the decisions of these bodies, these student leaders also had limited ownership over the brand their collegial governance system crafted. University administration argued the students’ union had to “temper the desire to make sure [they’re] not negatively impacting the brand of the institution” (1252). This rejects the validity of multiple frames of meaning and understanding; there is not one culture to a university, and by its nature it will have many divergent groups with radically different beliefs about how things should be work. The promotion of a singular brand is an attempt to control a message, which would be at odds with the democratic roots of the students’ union and collegial governance. The students actually saw “tarnishing” the reputation of the university as a means to “get stuff done” (5467-5468).

The formal system works to minimize contact between groups who might have conflicting values and goals (Baldrige, 1971). However, the students’ union was generally excluded from these authority structures. This is not to say they did not have contact with individuals and roles within the university’s bureaucracy or collegial governance structures, but that the structures themselves would have minimal influence on how the culture of the students’ unions interacted with others

in the university in the negotiation of a broader organizational culture. The conflict the students' union had with other groups on campus was produced in other arenas, and was made possible through not just divergent goals and values, but complex layers of culture that operate in our reality simultaneously.

**A layered culture.** Culture is the result of negotiation, and in any negotiation conflict is a natural by-product. We use power to navigate conflict, which ultimately produces the basic underlying assumptions that support a culture (Baldrige, 1971; Mitroff, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981; Schein, 2010). Different layers of understanding and culture were created within the university, as the students' union had minimal access to authority and decision-making structures. The students' union developed independent assumptions that operated with the university's administration's culture for the most part seamlessly. These layers are real and legitimate, and even may be conflicting at times, but as part of the negotiation that is culture these different perspectives end up creating the culture that is in play, largely dictating the means and manner in which decisions are made and power is distributed. But, access and ability to use power dictates when a layer is in play (Schein, 2010). Because the two organizations operated largely in isolation, these layers of the culture rarely come into conflict. This analysis shows some large areas of disagreement, which could produce conflict when the layered understandings interact and ultimately clash.

The earlier discussion of different understandings of the university's brand and how it was actualized is an example of layered culture at work. Another example was how students and university participants saw the role and

responsibilities of university administration. Student participants saw them as the major decision makers within the university (Figure 3.3). Figure 4.2 presents a drawing by a student participant, which shows the university social system as incredibly fragmented, with the students' union, student radicals, and faculty (including collegial governance) external to university administration who has decision-making power within the university. Alternatively, university administrators saw themselves as facilitators for different sectors of the university, which are prominent in the university participants word cloud (Figure 3.3) on university administration. Instead, university administrators pointed to collegial governance as the major decision-makers within the university.

The identity of the 'student' in 'students' union' was contested between university and student participants. University participants relied on the students' union for information related to what students needed and desired. We can see through Figure 3.1 that university administrators viewed the students' union as the representatives of a unified student voice. This assumption about the role of the students' union was repeated numerous times throughout interviews and the interpretive panels, and it is one the students' union participants rejected outright. Executive members did not feel they had the legitimacy to provide the kind of information the university administration relied on them for, as they could only claim to represent *some* students. Further, the assumption that the students' union represents all students would lead one to believe the students' union—and by extension the student body as a whole—would be satisfied by their inclusion on university governance. However, the Executive had largely rejected the efficacy of

collegial governance structures for their personal mandates, and felt the one or two seats they had been allocated were more tokenistic than access to real authority. They continued to fulfill these responsibilities because they believed in the importance of collegial governance, but as a result many student interests were left unrepresented within university authority structures.

Students' union participants could operate under this different assumption, as they did not have to work with university administrators in any official capacity. Lack of access to authority systems within the university meant these different assumptions did not routinely come into conflict. However, when these different assumptions do come into contact, the potential for conflict could be explosive; these are very basic assumptions that are tied to identity.

### **External Environment**

To this point, I have largely spoken about how the students' union operated within the university. Within this exploration, an assumption is made: that the students' union is part of the university. There was some disagreement among the participants about the nature of how the students' union interacted with the university and its systems of authority. As I have argued that conflicting cultural assumptions can be layered within an organization, this section intersects with that of subcultures; the students' union both exists internal to the university's social context and as part of the university's external environment. However, when you look past some of these espoused beliefs and examine how the students' union operated within their reality, it becomes clear the students' union in practice was not external to or independent from the university, but instead was part of the

“subcultural network” within the “*internal*/social setting” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 123, emphasis in original).

The students’ union primarily felt they were external to the university; they used phrases like “silo,” “arm’s length,” and that “a students’ union is just different” when asked about their relationship with the university (3327; 2754; 4175). When pressed about the potentially conflicting nature of students’ union Executive members sitting on university governance bodies, one student participant said, “I kind of see where the puzzle is in that. I as a student representative end up sitting on Senate committees. But maybe why that’s conspicuous is because we’re separate organizations. Our autonomy is pretty important to the whole function” (4001-4003). All student drawings, as presented through Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, presented the university and students’ union with varying degrees of separate mandates, but with a considerable amount of their engagement with the university as oppositional and influenced by asymmetrical power relationships. In many ways, the students’ union exists to “not be the university” (5463-5467) as they fill a void in service delivery.

The university, on the other hand, saw the students’ union as a part of the bedrock of the university; they are believed to be one and the same, but the students’ union had a more focused mission that would be a part of the larger university mission. As indicated earlier, many university administrators argued it was the students’ union’s responsibility to protect a certain ‘brand’ or a ‘reputation’ of the university.

If it's a risk to the university, if it's a risk to students, if it's contravening laws or university policy, if we have a fiduciary or legal or statutory obligation to step in then we step in...through legitimate formal mechanisms. (1913-1916)

The recent conflict between the University of Calgary and their students' union over the rights to the student building shows that this "fiduciary or legal or statutory obligation" could be interpreted in wildly different ways. Regardless, it was clear the university participants did not consider the students' union to be external to the organization, and considered them part of the university's administration.

Yet, the students' union defined its purpose in relation to the university; they were reliant on the university for survival and for purpose. The university and its administration controlled the students' union's existence to a large degree as the university owned the building in which the union operated, collected and distributed their membership fees, controlled access to membership communications, underwrote debts for the union, and had access to or control over other aspects of the students' union's existence. As a student participant argued, the "students' unions wouldn't really exist as such if it weren't for the layer of administration [in the university] that makes decisions about students" (3993-3994). This extended to students' unions obeying university policy "just like any other individual or organization on campus" (5478). Another student participant said that while the university and the students' union exist separately, at some point they do "bleed together" (3338).

Without the university, the students' union would have no members, no mandate, and no reason to be. There are no such restrictions on the professional or bureaucratic authority structures within the university; they were free to operate within their respective arenas of authority. This lends a new perspective to one student's opinion that "I don't view the university as my master, but to a certain extent it's the reality" (3091-3092).

**Discussion.** The students' union was a unique subculture within the university. While they shared many of the same artefacts and espoused beliefs, it was apparent within some core assumptions there was a gulf in understanding between the university administration and the students' union. Each person's reality is comprised of their lived experiences, and to each person that reality is valid and legitimate. As people bring these lived experiences into the organizations to which they belong, these diverse and possibly contradictory realities are present. Through a process of socialization and negotiation, these people then serve to impact and be impacted by the structures of authority within which they work. The students' union was unique because it grew from a leadership that changed yearly, in addition to lacking authority within the organization they wished to influence. Executive members had voting seats on all university governance bodies, and the university's bureaucracy valued them as the voice of students on campus, but this authority was limited in scope and relied on the goodwill of specific university administrators. They were still isolated enough from other groups on campus—due to their lack of formal authority—to maintain the fragmentation necessary to avoid most conflicts (Baldrige, 1971; Schein, 2010). As the students' union was largely excluded from



systems of authority within the university they had a limited ability to participate in the process of negotiation that develops organizational culture (Bates, 1981; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). So, while the students' union represented a subculture within the university, they lacked ownership over the larger university organizational culture, and developed and maintained basic cultural assumptions distinct from that of the university's.

Layered culture, as described above, enabled that process. Conflict can arise when these layers come into contradiction. The majority of the time these layers of culture remained separate, but when they did converge there was potential for real conflict. When confronted with these differences, a student participant thought it explained "a lot of our [the students' union] interactions" with the university (5450). It was as if the students' union had been trying to have a conversation with the university, and even though they were agreeing on the terms, the definition of the terms varied wildly, ultimately causing the two parties to be having different conversations. This caused confusion when inexperienced Executive members tried to understand and interpret the behaviour of university administrators. Baldrige (1971) discussed this difference in relation to faculty members and the bureaucrats of the university, but the main message is relevant for students as well, especially considering their integration into the professional authority structures of the organization.

The conflict between the bureaucrats and the professionals has many consequences for academic governance, for their different orientations give them contradictory perspectives on the problems and needs of the

university. The bureaucrats must see that the organization as a whole runs smoothly...[while] the professional is oriented to the peculiar needs and requirements of [their] specialty... The critical point is that these are not necessarily contradictory stances, for both are necessary if the university is to achieve its goals. Warfare between these stances is common, but life would be impossible without both orientations. (p. 158)

However, due to the lack of access to the formal professional authority structures, the capacity of the students' union to dictate the terms in a cultural space was limited. When the layered culture was put to the test, reality was ultimately determined by the group who had authority—usually the university administration.

### **Students Using and Accessing Power**

The students' union represented a unique subculture within the university, and participated within the political arena as a partisan group affected by decisions made by authorities (Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Mintzberg, 1983). Figure 1.4 outlines a general typology of partisan groups within the university. The students' union primarily acted as a structural associational interest group, but with restrictions on their capacity to “protect the interests of persons located in similar life-situations within the formal organizational network” (Baldrige, 1971, p. 146). The students themselves represented an “intensely active minority who become activists to change conditions in the university” (p. 147). If these ‘activists’ want to change conditions in the university they need to harness and use power wisely.

Recall from the discussion in Chapter Two how Dahl (1957) provided one of the first widely recognized, albeit simplistic, definitions of power. He saw power as “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (p. 202). Further, Baldrige provided a more exciting approach to power, and presented it as “the resources available to a partisan group—the weapons it can muster to influence policies” (p. 154). Power within a university is organized through the parallel authority system. Bureaucrats and professionals—primarily, faculty—use these structures to exert power and influence policy (Baldrige, 1971). However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, students and their students’ union are almost entirely excluded from these authority structures, and Executive members have rejected it as an avenue to achieve their personal mandates. Baldrige predicted that students would have authority extended to them throughout areas of student life, but has not become the reality, at least on this campus. He thought that more authority and power would be devolved to the students’ union, but they still needed university bureaucracy many times to reach their goals.

Within Baldrige’s (1971) framework, “power bases” were defined in relation to resources available to groups: bureaucratic, professional influence, coercion, and personal influence (1971, p. 154). *Bureaucratic* resources are reliant on “the force of *legitimacy*” where a person’s actions are viewed as a “legitimate function of [their] role, one designed to carry out the organizations objectives...This is the exercise of the control right that we usually call formal ‘authority’... A third bureaucratic resource is the control of *legitimate access*... to the decision-making

process [which] is a significant advantage for influencing policy” (pp. 154-155). The Executive certainly had some power over their own bureaucratic structures, but when this frame is applied to the university the students did not have bureaucratic power. There was some discussion about the autonomy of the students’ union, but it was also clear there was a lot of limitation to behaviour to remain *legitimate* in the eyes of the bureaucracy.

Executive members have been integrated as *professionals* into the university’s social system. Professionals are given influence due to their expertise in their area of specialization (Baldrige, 1971). The students’ union was seen to have that expertise in the realm of student needs and desires, but the Executive rejected that premise, and also felt ultimately powerless as members of these structures.

Baldrige (1971) argued “[i]f partisans cannot use either of these resources to influence policy, they are likely to turn to nonformal, extralegal action” (p. 160). He identified students in particular as leading the charge in using these coercive resource bases, and university participants also identified the students’ union as using these resources regularly, “They lobby, they gather momentum, go to the media which is a tool they often use... sometimes the media can be the stick and sometimes a carrot works better with university administration” (1835-1840). Executive members tended to reject coercive tactics as they derived much of their power from the use of personal influence resources (Baldrige, 1971). To use their personal influence students still needed to be legitimate within bureaucratic authority structures, and many students looked to the university to achieve their goals. To be legitimate, students had to pass a test through becoming cultural

chameleons. They had sometimes radically different cultural assumptions, but they need to learn how to mimic the university well enough for administrators to feel comfortable operating within their cultural assumptions. Baldrige (1971) argued “interest groups show a remarkable tendency to be structured like the authority groups they hope to influence” (p. 164). As a result, the students’ union operated in a fashion more like that of the university’s bureaucratic cultural assumptions; the unconscious influence was strong, and it made access to power within the university part of an exclusive club.

The students’ union was an unfriendly place for student radicals, and the capacity to operate on the university’s level was so important they were largely lost with what to do with the Council of Students. Some attempts were made to educate these student leaders so they could be more effective working with their own college bureaucracy, but the attention was again on the bureaucracy to create change and not the collegial and professional authority structures to which they had been given access.

### **Personality**

The students’ union participants spoke about using the governance structures of the institution to create relationships with those who had the influence and power to help achieve that Executive member’s goals. The structures provided the opportunity for some executive members to get access to who they viewed as “decision-makers” on campus and an accessible source of power: those within the university’s *bureaucratic authority system*.

Student access to the bureaucratic authority structure was largely dependent on their ability to use their *personality* as a source power and create a network of relationships within the university bureaucracy. Personality was described by Baldrige (1971) as the “elusive quality known as ‘leadership’” that was used by partisans to access power. While he did not go into depth into what this means and how partisans use the personality of those at the forefront of their groups, he argued that both “partisan and authority groups alike are dependant on the personal skills and qualities of their members” (p. 163). It seems, here, this was almost entirely where Executive members gained their power.

Student leaders used their access to the professional network to familiarize themselves with the informal side of the organization, and identify the bureaucrats they needed to influence to achieve their goals. When I asked the student participants for names of key individuals within the university they primarily engaged with, almost all the names were of administrators and not members of the university’s collegial and professional authority structures. This is not a point to gloss over; the students’ union democratic structures worked primarily with the university’s bureaucratic structures and not those with democratic roots like collegial governance. The students’ union drew their power from understanding this more informal side of the organization and their capacity to replicate it (Deal & Kennedy; Schein, 2010; Selznick, 1978). These “unique personal marks” were the basis of success within the university, through which students formed personal and professional relationships with administrators, as shown in Chapter Four (Baldrige, 1971, p. 162). These students must be “[s]trong individuals” which Baldrige

considered to be “an important resource for a partisan group trying to influence policies. That elusive quality known as ‘leadership’ certainly must be considered as a critical element in the success or failure of a group’s efforts” (p. 163). Executive members effectively tried to gain power and influence by engaging with administration as colleagues, perpetuating the cultural assumptions and norms as required to maintain access. This tactic was unstable, as it relied on a particular type of leader to operate correctly enough within the university bureaucratic world to use power within the greater university. Some years the student voice would be absent from university discussions because of differences in personality with administrators. Perhaps this is part of what triggered the students’ union’s willingness to resort to coercion as a tactic, primarily using media as their choice of tool. The capacity of the student leader to become a cultural chameleon, as will be discussed later in this chapter, influenced the amount of authority and power they could wield within the university bureaucracy.

### **Capacity of Students to Participate within the University**

Executive members were viewed as young, inexperienced, and ineffective before they were socialized into the university administration’s culture, or if an Executive member rejected that socialization (Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Giddens (2007) argued “social incompetence is commonly attributed to people in lower socio-economic groupings by those in power-positions” (p. 239). While it was not necessarily due to socio-economic power dynamics, there was a perception student leaders were inexperienced and lacked the capacity to adequately understand the complexity of the university. This was attributed to a sort of social

incompetence reflected in the Executive's inability to operate according to accepted university norms and ideals. The capacity of the Executive to capitalize on their personality was influenced by this assumption held by some university administrators. The information and organization was believed to be too complex for an Executive member to learn with only one year's time, and as such their perspective had no value in certain spaces. Executive members recognized their limitations with respect to complex problems—especially in areas like finances—but they believed the university had a responsibility to break information down in an active effort to engage students within the decision-making process. Otherwise, the argument of complexity could be used to limit access to any aspect of campus life, and students could lose the limited capacity they have to engage within the larger university discourse. Many participants, primarily university administrators, suggested a solution to this problem would be for Executive members to stay in their terms for a longer period. Some Executive members thought there may be some value to a discussion critical of students' union processes, like term lengths, but ultimately felt the university had a responsibility to educate.

Even though there were numerous instances where student participants expressed frustration about their ability to understand the world of the university, many were still able to pass this legitimacy test in some spaces. This means of accessing power influenced the perceived culture of the students' union to such a degree that access to student leadership was restricted by the union membership to those who could conform enough. The students' union was a fine-tuned service provision organization that existed to fill a gap in service-delivery left by the



university, and the student populace elected those that could improve service delivery. Student radicals rarely got elected; Executive members argued student radicals would not find success within the students' union as radicals could not find legitimacy with university administration.

**Complex information and complex organization.** One reason the Executive had difficulty in their positions was because the university was an incredibly complex organization that was challenging to learn to navigate in only one year. Students needed a detailed road map to access authority and power within the university to “get stuff done” without resorting to coercive tactics (5468). A student participant said it took them “a good couple of months to figure that [who to talk to in the university administration] out... I really need the university to help me navigate the institution a little bit” (2812-2818). University participants believed it was inevitable that the process took many years for anyone to become adept at operating within

It generally takes a Board member, for example, a good couple of years to get comfortable with the level of information that comes at them, and it can be 700 plus pages per Board meeting. So when you're going through six of those a year as a student it can be overwhelming and daunting, so you can feel like you're disconnected from that process. So sometimes it's just because of the volume and the mismatch between your timing and duration on that committee. (2310-2313)

As someone who has sat on many similar bodies as a student representative, I know these meetings can be incredibly overwhelming at first, and take time to get used to

structures and new ways of doing. However, the question remains if the university has a responsibility to assist students in achieving the level of competence they need to participate within university governance structures. University participants argued that was the role of the students' union's bureaucracy, but student participants believed there was more responsibility than that on the shoulders of the university.

University administrators appeared more reliant on the formalized structures that already existed to include students in decision-making processes, and placed more emphasis and importance on the impact of these formalized mechanisms for including students. This formalization and institutionalization of their relationships can be construed as efforts to regulate, and thus have predictability and an ability to control or manipulate the formalized structures (Baldrige, 1971). Student participants themselves rejected these formalized structures for their ends.

Organizations have a habit of enacting structures that protect their own survival (Baldrige, 1971; Howe, 2000). These self-preservation tactics required those who wish to work within the system and have power to become increasingly adept at operating within an increasingly bureaucratic and complicated culture, and as many student leaders are in their early 20s do not have the professional experience to participate in that conversation. This limits the ability for anyone—other than specialized bureaucrats or faculty members who can draw their power from their specialized knowledge—to participate (Baldrige, 1971; Mouffe, 1998).

***Legitimacy test.*** The Executive relied on their personality to influence the bureaucratic authority structures, which was largely how they accessed power

within the university. However, Executive access to the bureaucratic power structures of the university was not secure, and was determined by passing a legitimacy test and maintaining a positive relationship with administrators. As culture within the university was layered, Executives had to become cultural chameleons to have influence and pass this legitimacy test to become “pseudo-mini administrators” (3113-3114). The university had more power and had a greater ability to dictate the terms of the relationship. Executives all had to pass a legitimacy test by administrators and university officials, which was “that question of ‘are you [student leader] worth my time?’” (3103-3104). An administrator argued this was a natural part of organizational life: “When you’re dealing with senior administration in any organization, you are being put through a test no matter who you are” (2369-2371). Another administrator took exception to this argument, and believed administration had a responsibility to “take students at face value” and “especially ones that are in representative roles” (2092-2093).

The relationship of these “neighbours and friends” (958) matured into one where adversary and conflict was normal and expected, marked by respect and trust. However, there were limitations to the disagreements that were considered acceptable by many administrators, as the students’ union was expected to operate within certain cultural assumptions and expectations. Not doing so would create additional barriers for the students’ union executive to fulfill their mission, and so the students’ union executives learned how to conform to these cultural assumptions. They are friends—but with an asterisk.

This test was to determine if the students' union executive member could operate effectively and efficiently within the organizational culture of university administration (Schein, 2010). University administrators had the privilege to avoid this test from the students' union as they had more authority and power in the relationship. If students wanted access to the bureaucratic authority structures of the university, it was a requirement to conform. The students' union was acutely aware of this test and the expectations inherent; they became adept in how they used the tools at their disposal. If a student were to fail this legitimacy test, they would lose access to the university administration, effectively removing the largest component of the student voice from the larger university conversation.

*Cultural chameleons.* As the students' union was isolated from accessing power through formal systems, they found alternative means to achieve their goals (Baldrige, 1971). If an Executive member needed the university's cooperation on a project or a goal, they had to operate seamlessly within both students' union and university administration organizational cultures. The university administration had the ability to, knowingly or not, force student union leaders to conform in exchange for power and authority. The students' union was forced to draw their power from this ability to mimic assumptions and unspoken structures inherent within the university bureaucracy. Baldrige (1971) observed that interest groups, which encompasses students' unions broadly, "seem to be able to switch roles rather easily, at one moment sitting on an official committee and the next moment sitting with their partisan cliques planning strategies that will influence the officials" (p. 178). Students had to almost "transform from an undergraduate into a pseudo-

mini administrator,” in exchange for access to power, which made that student participant “cringe” (3113-3114). The university administration considered the students’ union part of the administration of the university, or at least part of the collegial governance structures, and as such expected the student leader to conform to the university’s culture. In a way they became cultural chameleons, with the capacity to operate within different cultural assumptions from their own (Baldrige, 1971; Schein, 2010).

Due to their privilege within the hegemony of the university, the university administration had less motivation and space to reflect upon their actions. Giddens (2007) argued “those in subordinate positions [of authority] in a society might have a greater penetration of the conditions of social reproduction than those who otherwise dominate them” (p. 239). The Executive members appeared to have a deeper understanding of representation and the student voice, which was the administration’s perception of the ultimate role and purpose of the students’ union. The Executive members had to become adept at operating within the administrative culture to make up for the lack of understanding from the administration’s side. The Executive had to figure out how to work within these new assumptions and culture in order to be effective, which for the Executive, was to realize their individual election mandates. Research has indicated that if two organizations understand each other’s cultures, they are able to have more effective relationships (Boonpattarakarn, 2012; Jim Im, 2013). While this result does not challenge that assumption, it does offer a slight adjustment. Only one group in the exchange needs to understand cultural differences to work together effectively and efficiently. The

students' union executive members tried to pass this experience and knowledge base on to their Council of Students; they were trying to empower students and give them the tools to become cultural chameleons within their college authority structures.

**Exclusion of radicalism.** The students' union Executive actively rejected a radical frame of reference to become cultural chameleons and pass the legitimacy test. For student leaders to be effective within the university—without destroying important relationships built to help facilitate the students' union's primary service mission—they had to work within the power and authority structures of the university. To do so, they had to conform to the assumptions within the university by becoming cultural chameleons with the capacity to move seamlessly between different layers of culture. Student radicals, as they were unable to conform, could not access the power necessary to effectively negotiate their own goals, which were different from the students' union and the university. This was viewed as the only way the Executive could achieve their mandate—their election platform; this has had a profound impact not just on their relationship with the university, but also their democratic organizations. A student participant upon reflection stated that

I come from activism. I grew up in activism. That's how I was raised from my teenage years to now, I think. There's a time and a place for activism, like radical activism... But I think that a lot more can actually be accomplished through respectful positive and collegial discussions... [and without] that respectfulness and collegiality then it's just petty bullshit.

(5636-5646)

Executives using these tactics may be “labeled as sell outs by a constituency of people” (5672-5673). The students’ union had become primarily a service-delivery organization, which included certain advocacy and support functions primarily performed by paid staff. As such, the radical and political nature that has long been associated with students’ union has seemed to become an optional or even inferior approach to achieve most goals.

Access to power for students was based in the informal and human side of the university, and was largely inaccessible to anyone not on the students’ union Executive. It was a division between the elected student representatives and those students who the students’ union saw as the most engaged and passionate: student radicals. These radicals had cast aside the students’ union as a vehicle for their change. As student radicals lacked access to both the *professional* and *bureaucratic* power networks of the university, and lacked access to influence via the “legitimate conflict” afforded to the students’ union, they have been pushed to the fringes of the university community. Radicals then revert to different tactics where they can access a power network: activism and protest (Baldrige, 1971; Howe, 2000; Mouffe, 1998).

Administration lacked the capacity to engage with the general student body. There was a belief that the university was engaging students through engaging the students’ union, and that satiated a need for inclusion. But students are not engaged effectively through the students’ union, and this can lead to people feeling alienated from the system and choose to operate outside of formal structures. By only engaging the students’ union, the university was alienating much of the student

body, which could make clear communication difficult between student radicals and university administrators, as well.

## **Summary**

Although the students' union represented a major subculture within the university, with independent goals and values, the Executive had limited interaction with the formal systems—be it bureaucratic or professional—of the university. The Executive by its nature was excluded from bureaucratic authority structures, and were integrated to a limited extent within professional authority structures. Student leaders rejected collegial bodies to achieve their mandates due to feelings of tokenism and a lack of capacity for collegial structures to make the kind of change students promoted.

As a result, the students' union's divergent goals and values rarely encountered the university's, which limited the students' union's ability to participate in the continual negotiation and construction of the greater university's organizational culture (Bates, 1981; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). The students' union developed independent assumptions that operated with the university's administration's culture for the most part seamlessly. The different assumptions between the students' union and their university counterparts were legitimate and valid; they existed as part of the layered culture of the university.

The university had the authority to dictate which layer of culture was enacted at a specific point in time. For student leaders to be effective within the university—without destroying important relationships built to help facilitate the students' union's primary service mission—they had to work within the power and authority



structures of the university. To do so, they had to conform to the assumptions within the university by becoming cultural chameleons with the capacity to move seamlessly between different layers of culture. There was a legitimacy test students had to pass to determine if they could transform well enough to pass as “pseudo-mini administrators” (3113-3114). Student radicals, as they were unable to conform, could not access the power necessary to effectively negotiate their own goals, which were quite different from the students’ union and the university.

## **Chapter 6: The Knowledge**

Students' unions are important partners on university campuses, and although these organisations provide essential services—including student representation within university governance structures and other supports—they have been almost entirely ignored in research (Baldrige, 1971; Jones, 1995; Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Tierney, 2008). Even with the students' union's access to senior decision makers and inclusion as professionals within university authority structures, university leadership has limited ability to make decisions inclusive of students (Tierney, 2008). Functionally, this dissertation is a case study of the role and purpose of a students' union at a western Canadian university (Jones, 1995; Yin, 2009). I have used a theoretical framework based in a constructivist ontological and epistemological understanding of reality and how we come to know. I draw upon the writings of Habermas and Giddens as conflicting, yet complimentary critical social theorists who are based within a constructivist frame (Bates, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Their focus on the interpersonal and power ties together my political and cultural conceptual framework, and positions it within the larger world of theory and praxis (Baldrige, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981; Schein, 2010; Tierney, 2008).

In the last chapter, this theoretical model was applied to the themes identified in Chapter Four. Much of Chapter Six will be a reiteration of much of Chapter Five, but for specific rationale: answering the research questions. The Chapter begins with my answers to these research questions. The subject matter has been extensively reviewed in other areas of this dissertation, and so the answers to the

research questions are intentionally concise. I then outline the implications this research has on theory. The next section of this chapter encompasses a personal reflection on the research itself, in addition to the theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, and methods chosen. This reflection—which largely represents the learning I have completed as an emerging scholar and new researcher—leads into a discussion of potential avenues of research that have emerged from my research. As there are no ‘conclusions’ for this dissertation—as it but one educated and expert perspective on one university—the knowledge gained has opened several exciting and promising frameworks to further the learning. Last, the chapter ends with a summary of my concluding thoughts at the end of my PhD and dissertative journey. These are not findings, but instead reflections of the learning I have done primarily as a citizen and public scholar.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions as presented in Chapter One are reproduced below for ease of reference. Each question is answered separately under its own heading.

1. How is the purpose and role of students’ unions interpreted by the leaders of the students’ union and their administrative counterparts in a western Canadian university?
  - B) How similar or different are the understandings of these groups about the purpose of students’ unions in a western Canadian university?
2. How does Baldrige’s (1979) conceptualization of the political university aid in constructing a theory for the students’ union informed by participant’s reflections on their experiences?

## Research Question #1

The perspective of student participants is presented first, and that of the university participants second. Several key areas are expanded upon in their own discussions under each.

**Students' perspective on purpose of students' union.** The purpose of the students' union was to fill a service delivery gap left—by the university—for the membership, which were undergraduate students at the university. In this way, the students' union existed “to not be the university” (5467) as the two organizations were believed by student participants to have unique and different mandates. Service delivery to membership, including democratic services and student life services. The bulk of service delivery—apart from democratic services—was administered by the students' union professionalized bureaucracy, and it formed the largest interactions the students' union had with their membership.

**Democratic services.** Three different kinds of democratic services were identified by student participants:

1. Representation;
2. Advocacy; and,
3. Personal mandates as articulated through each Executive Committee member's election platform.

*Representation.* The students' union represented students primarily through collegial governance structures, through relationships with administrators, and in times of perceived organizational crises. However, student participants were unable to feel confident in their representation of all students as their membership was

heterogeneous, and many of the most engaged students like radicals and activists wanted little to do with the organization.

The most engaged students, according to participants, were student radicals. These students are active in the political life of the university, but usually do not have an official relationship to the students' union. According to one participant, the student radicals want nothing to do with the students' union. This was accepted as the reality of the situation, as student radicals were not seen as capable of operating within the structures of the students' union, and with respect to their relationship with university administrators. However, these student radicals also played an important accountability measure for some Executive members to ensure they were not co-opted by members of the university administration or accultured completely into the administration.

Student participants believed the university had to expand their student engagement as student participants argued they could not represent the entirety of their membership due to the diversity of the student body and the low voter turnout. In the meantime, Executive members sometimes felt they had to “fake it”—knowing what students want—because they wanted the administration to keep asking the question, and these exchanges were much of the engagement the university had with students (4285). The students' union appeared to fill this function particularly well when there was a perceived threat to what the students' thought was shared cultural values.

*Advocacy.* The students' union's advocacy service was primarily used by individual students or a specific group of students for a particular goal. For example,

the students' union offered academic advocacy services for students. Some of this role was devolved to the students' union bureaucracy, with the Executive Director, some part-time staff, and volunteers aiding students.

*Executive mandates.* The primary democratic service offered to students was the outcomes of Executive member's attempts at realizing their election platform. The mission of the organization provided sufficient flexibility to accommodate a wide range of individual and potentially creative students' union mandates. As such, the specific mission the organization tried to actualize largely changed from year-to-year, and depended on the personality and priorities of individual student Executive members. Yearly turnovers of organizational leadership were intimately tied with yearly—and sometimes impacts were much more long term—priorities of the organization. But, this was also viewed as a positive as it allowed students to maintain fresh ideas within the static university culture. At times, individual mandates of each Executive member could compete, but this was viewed as normal practice within the students' union.

There were, however, limited checks and balances on this mandate other than the yearly election. The students' union's main governing body, the Council of Students, was not used effectively and had limited capacity to provide that necessary check and balance. In some ways, student radicals provided a more effective and real check and balance on the actions and behaviours of the Executive.

*Student life services.* Student life services included the bulk of service delivery within the students' union. This service function was central to the identity of the students' union, and included business operations such as maintenance of the

students' union facilities, contractual relationships with third parties—e.g. public transit passes, health and dental insurance coverage—and, peer-support services like the Women's Centre and the LGBTQ centre. These functions are performed almost entirely by paid professional bureaucrats. The students' union bureaucracy was well respected by the elected Executive, and as such there was not much worry expressed about that autonomy. In fact, this bureaucratic autonomy was interpreted as providing an imperative service to the Executive leaders that allowed them to pursue their individual mandates and election promises.

**University perspective.** The purpose of the students' union was to be the *legitimate voice* of the students. Executive members represented the interests of their membership—undergraduate students at the university—to several audiences, and to the university's administration. A unified voice was expected among the Executive members. The students' union was also an important service provider on campus, and in that way, was part of the university administration.

**Representation.** The students' union is the legitimate and democratic voice of undergraduate students on campus. Most administrators thought all student leadership and representation on campus had a connection to the students' union in some formal manner. Recent protest activity on campus was attributed to the students' union, and it was thought if a student wanted to impact change on campus they would need to go through the students' union election process and become an Executive member. In this manner, the students' union was the legitimized venue for the expression of discontent from students within the university. However, when

presented with examples of non-students' union student leadership on campus, participants were able to identify their own original examples.

University administrators identified three primary audiences for representation:

1. University, including both collegial and administrative authorities;
2. Government; and,
3. Their membership.

The students' union was the students' representation within university collegial governance structures. Students were represented through their membership within the students' union, and provided a critical/alternative perspective. Much of the students' union's legitimacy—in the eyes of university administrators—was derived from their positions within university governance. The students' union was also seen as the “voice of the customer” (1131), and provided university administration with the “pulse” of students and identified “hot issues” for administration. The university relied on the students' union for providing this perspective, as other student leaders were not considered legitimate student voices in the same manner. University administrators believed there were issues the students' union could pressure for change that were outside the responsibility of the university; students could effectively ask for things the university could not, and this was valuable. For example, lower tuition fees and increased funding for the university were priorities identified by administrative participants for the students' union that the university itself could not pursue for political reasons.



The students' union was the primary university lobbyist to the three levels of government relating to student issues. This could include tuition fee levels or the provincial funding levels for the university's operations; things university participants believed they could not ask for. Lastly, university administrators believed the students' union acted as "interpreters for the university to the student" (209) and had responsibilities for promoting certain ideals on campus, such as anti-bullying initiatives and mental health awareness to their membership.

**Service.** The students' union was a critical service provider on campus, and in this way the students' union was part of the university's administration. The students' union's great service capacity was largely due to the students' union's competent professional bureaucracy. This was the basis of many relationships between the students' union bureaucracy—the Executive Director—and university administration. As the students' union was part of the administration of the university and its collegial governance structures, they were subject to university processes and policies, including how the institution had determined its brand.

### **Research Question #1b**

The following section presents similarities found between the perspectives of student and university participants on the role and purpose of the students' union, with differences discussed after.

**Similarities.** The students' union and the university administration had the same basic understanding of the purpose of the students' union: service delivery and representation of the undergraduate students. They agree almost unilaterally on the service function of the students' union and the related importance of the

students' union bureaucracy in carrying out that service role on campus. Most participants felt it was difficult for the students' union to affect change in the university due to their steep learning curves. Due to the students' union professionalized bureaucracy, the students' union can continue to offer quality services to their membership.

**Representation.** They both felt it was difficult for the students' union to affect change in the university due to their steep learning curves. Both participant groups agreed that a one year term for executive members limited the student union's ability to carry out its mandate. This was made even more difficult due to how much the Executive members had to learn in a very short amount of time. Student participants felt comfortable in their positions by some time in the fall term, which left four to eight months left in their terms to carry out any projects. In that time, they had to figure out how the university works, and how to effectively participate in discussions. University participants recognized this steep curve. All participants believed universities take a long time to change, as they are massive bureaucracies that are reliant on and responsible to several stakeholders. As such, consensus was that affecting change in the university in only one year is very difficult.

**Service.** Due to the students' union professionalized bureaucracy, the students' union can continue to offer quality services to their membership. Most all participants gave a great deal of credit to the bureaucracy of the students' union, and the Executive Director, in carrying out the service function of the students' union. Student participants presented this function as the most important aspect of the union to their membership, and university participants considered this service

function indispensable to the student experience on campus. The services the students' union offered were almost unilaterally described as professionally ran, efficient, and important to campus. Some administrators even said the students' union was part of university administration due to the centrality of their service role.

**Differences.** While participants almost universally agreed upon the basic structure of the purpose of the students' union, it was only an agreement of language and not meaning. When details are examined, the Executive and the university administration had significantly different understanding in one area: the meaning and fulfillment of their representational function. Student participants saw their mandate differently in very slight ways that, when carried out in the public and political sphere, have large implications on how these two groups understand each other. The students' union saw their role as more external to the university; the university considered them part of the same unit and even considered the students' union to be part of the administration of the university. This had implications in how they defined and actualized concepts like representation, student, etc. Lastly, the students' union saw their role to "not be the university" and fill the service gap the university left instead of filling a unique service function on campus.

**Representation.** When the details are examined, Executive and administrators were worlds apart in their understanding of one area: the meaning and fulfillment of the students' union's representational function. Student and administrative participants had very different conceptualizations of the constituency of the students' union. There was a disagreement between student and university

participants on the importance placed upon using formal channels for accessing power structures within the university.

*Constituencies.* Student and administrative participants had different conceptualizations of the constituency of the students' union. While university participants considered the students' union to be the 'voice of students', student participants presented their mandate as narrower in scope. These students ran and won for these positions not to claim universal representation; their mandate was personal, and primarily rested on the content of their campaign during the election. While they accepted that they certainly represented some students, they believed they lacked the ability to claim the universality that university participants proposed. However, university participants were initially unable to identify distinct segments and sources of leadership in the student body. University participants also conflated Executive members with the general student body in several instances. For example, some university participants presented Executive members as being intimidated and unable to participate in high-level discussions effectively due to their inexperience and short terms in office. This did not, however, corroborate with ethnographic data and the perceptions of student participants; which instead showed a confident Executive. When university participants spoke of individual Executive members, however, they did so with high esteem and praise. This would signify a direct contradiction to their earlier depictions of the Executive. Later in this chapter, contradictions like this will be examined in relation to the conceptual framework.

*Representation in Practice.* Student and administration participants disagreed about how important formal channels were for accessing power structures within the university. The representative strategy of the Executive was almost universally geared towards infiltrating informal power structures of the university, with university administrators as the primary target for lobbying efforts. Administrators indicated that they take their direction from collegial governance and are not the decision makers on campus. However, they also recognized the importance of the Executive's ability to access this informal power structure. Student representatives needed to learn how to operate within the university administration environment, effectively having to become "pseudo-mini administrators" (3113-3114).

**Service.** Student participants saw their role to "not be the university" and to fill the service gap the university left (5466-5467). The students' union considered this service their primary purpose on campus, with representation just one service of many. University participants talked about the students' union's service function as internal to the university. The students' union was seen to occupy a space that enabled them to perform certain functions the university was unable or uninterested in performing. For example, one university participant felt it was more appropriate for the students' union to lobby the provincial government for a larger operating grant for the university. When the student participants saw this in the interpretive panel, they were alarmed that the university was not lobbying the government for a larger operating grant, as they did not see it as within the purview of the students' union.

## Research Question #2

Undergraduate students were integrated as *professionals*—similarly to faculty members—within the collegial governance authority system, through representation by the students' union Executive committee. The students' union acted as 'the voice of students', even though the Executive did not claim to represent all students. The Executive argued that the most engaged students—radicals—wanted little to do with them.

The professional authority granted to the students' union Executive was largely ineffective for the needs of the students' union. The Executive was to provide their electorate with democratic services—representation, advocacy, and fulfilling their election mandate—in a variety of contexts. And, while collegial governance was part of their representative service delivery, their primary mandate was detailed in their election platforms and usually related to services of some kind. Further, the students' union bureaucracy had little to no interaction with university governance systems outside the capacity to alter their legal relationship with the university in some manner. An important note; as the individual mandate of each Executive members was to fulfil their election promises, the Executive does not necessarily have to engage within the university to fulfill their mandates. From the perspective of the student leader, that relationship with the university was largely optional. Most student participants reported feeling like tokens within the governance structures regardless, which was the result of inequalities on the structures themselves; in practice, one vote amongst 20 or more had minimal impact.

The student participants used personal influence (Baldrige, 1971) to form the relationships—largely with university administrators—needed to fulfill their personal election mandate. Collegial governance structures were used as a tool to figure out which administrators could help achieve the Executive member's mandate. However, for access via personal influence must pass a legitimacy test. Baldrige (1971) discussed legitimacy as a “force” wherein “[m]embers of the university community see his [the university bureaucrat] actions as a legitimate function of his role” (pp. 154-155). I posit that this concept of legitimacy needs to be extended to the capacity to operate with personal influence within the organization. Student leaders had to pass this legitimacy test by learning how to conform to the greater university administration's cultural assumptions and become a sort of *cultural chameleon* as a “pseudo-mini administrator” (3113-3114). This created an asymmetric power relationship between the students' union and the university, and the university usually had access to more power and could expect conformity. When there is a large power imbalance, one organization—or their agents—takes on the characteristics of the other to become seen as more legitimate. Culture is a negotiation, and as in any negotiation there is ultimately a winner and a loser (Baldrige, 1971; Lucas, 1987; Strauss et al., 1963). University administration could expect conformity meaning the frames of meaning of the university administration take precedence of those of the students.

The students' union represented a subculture within the university; but only one of many others within the greater student body. The student body itself was fragmented, much like how Baldrige (1971) discussed how authority structures

fracture the university social structure. The students' union also represented a unique administrative subculture within the university; the students' union was part of the university and its administration. This relationship was cemented through governance, the need to conform to university structures and policies, and the separate professional bureaucracy contained within the students' union that also worked substantially with administrators within the university.

The Executive largely left activism to other non-students' union associated student leaders and radicals to perform. Activism and the use of coercion was antithetical to the students' union achieving their goals, as it would hinder their capacity to pass as a *pseudo mini-administrator*, which could harm relationships with university administrators and make it more difficult to achieve their personal mandates.

My findings show that students and their administration see the role and place of the students' union within the university differently. The university was a political system with multiple actors vying for resources, much like the theory dictates. There were a multitude of realities on the university campus, all of which are valid representations of reality. However, there was an unequal power dynamic within the relationship, and while all realities may be valid in my eyes on a philosophical level, they are not equal in outcome.

### **My Theoretical Learning**

The primary contribution this research has made to the larger academic and theoretical world is a critical understanding of the place and role of the students' union within the larger social system of the university. Students are why



universities exist; this was not in dispute according to the totality of evidence gathered throughout my research. What also came out of the totality of evidence was that power within the university was in a very small number of hands. The formal leadership for students—the Executive of the students’ union—were not meaningfully engaged with the university in any formal manner (i.e., within the bureaucratic or the professional authority structures). Baldrige posited that students were beginning to take ownership over a portion of the bureaucratic structure when he wrote his book in 1971. But students have not received formal bureaucratic space within the university; they have instead taken over some aspects of student services at the behest of the university administration. This is illustrated through Figure 6, via the dotted line. The students’ union had some authority, but it was not ultimate, and they contracted that power to their own professional bureaucracy.

The students’ union lacked autonomy over their own being. Executive members had to operate within larger power structures and conform in order to pass the legitimacy test of university administrators to be granted access. This was a conscious effort of many Executive members, and why I have called this behaviour becoming a cultural chameleon. The students’ union itself might have a completely different organizational culture—determining this is out of the scope of my research—but Executive members had to shift gears when they were with administrators and become miniature administrators. These students were adept at navigating through a layered culture within the university. I use the term layered specifically because these layers did not seem to come together; Executive members

had to change how they performed culture to be accepted within the larger university culture. If students cannot be authentic to their ideals, what happens to the larger negotiation of culture? By definition, that negotiation cannot be considered communicative action, which creates room for oppressive systems to instead form the negotiated social reality. This means the students' union was one of the first gatekeepers in the larger negotiation of culture; student radicals rarely got elected to these positions. To be elected, student politicians needed to appeal to public—i.e., student—opinion.

Students were transient; they had no context for the larger conversations needed to take part in the negotiation of culture, so their interests were more immediate and service-based. This is a very transactional way to view politics within my theoretical framework, but it is not surprising when put into context. University has grown expensive over the last few decades, and students are increasingly taking out loans to pay for their education. The context here, then, can be argued to be primarily capitalist in origin. Students are unable to participate in the negotiation of culture because they operate within a larger capitalist structure; students need to worry about their own day-to-day, so they contract this participation to the students' union. But, as oppressive systems tend to do, the capitalist nature of student interests shape and mould the reality they do participate in. This is the process of colonizing of the lifeworld; the context that surround people intimately influence their thoughts and actions (Habermas, 1981). This requires student politicians to speak to the immediate and service-based interests of students to win election. To gain access to the power within the university to

complete those electoral promises, the students' union Executive must conform to university administrative expectations to be granted access and power via their personality. Upon reflection of my data, I am struck at how one of my participants viewed this process:

I think it's important to note that doing all of this [conforming and learning administrative norms] would get us labeled as sell outs by a constituency of people. I think that's just important to note. That there are two schools of thought, and I think one is growing substantially from nothing; that idea that oppositional politics should rule and we're trying to do radical things and change the university in a way that isn't respectful or collegial or all those sorts of things. That's important to note and watch for the future of students' unions. (5672-5678)

They are correct: this *is* important to note and needs to be considered for the future not just of students' unions, but of universities. Without students actively participating in communicative action and the negotiation of the larger university culture, this means the culture is being constructed without an actual student voice. Instead, the student voice is moderated first by election, as the student politician must appeal to a broad enough popular base to be elected into office. That moderation is reinforced through the actions and beliefs of university administrators who act as gatekeepers to the power structures that exist within the university through the construction of particular cultural norms.

Now, this line of thinking brings up a larger question as to why the students' union Executive targeted university administrators for their purposes and not

members of the collegial and professional structure. Simply put, Executive members could not get their personal mandates accomplished through professional authority structures. Executive members required access to bureaucratic power to accomplish their goals. Who, then, holds power within the university? I do not have enough evidence to begin to answer this question, but it is a powerful statement that students dismiss professional—that is, collegial—authority systems for their purposes. Their dismissal was not because the Executive members did not think this system was important. The collegial system was dismissed because Executive members felt they had no power due to tokenism, or the collegial system simply did not have the power needed to accomplish their individual electoral mandates. Has the university—or, this university at the point in time the research was conducted—begun to reach bureaucratic inertia? Is its purpose simply to exist as a university without any active and deliberate reflection on that purpose? If so, this means the university has fallen into the modernist bureaucratic trap of a continuous cycle of technical and effectively meaningless work—doing work for the sake of doing work without a larger vision.

There was, however, a breaking point in the willingness of Executive members to conform. At some point student leaders—and, students as a whole—were willing to risk their access to power through bureaucratic authority systems to make a larger idealist point. Again, I do not have enough evidence to investigate this more thoroughly; this avenue for potential research is explored at the end of this chapter. Within my theoretical framework, this is where students may have the most impact in performing communicative action. Maybe that participant was right; maybe the

students' union Executives are sell-outs when they agree to play by the university administration's rules. Or, are they using the tools at their disposal to get done what they need or want to get done? These are excellent questions to begin forming a life-long research and theoretical agenda.

### **Personal Reflection on the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The exercise of writing a dissertation is not solely to discover new knowledge for the masses to consume; it is to create original and creative researchers who can apply critical skills to a multitude of research endeavours. Without reflection, this development can only go so far. Reflection enables one to celebrate and examine mistakes to learn as much as possible from an experience. This section is a reflection on the research process itself. A more substantive discussion about my personal development as a citizen and a philosopher is at the end of the chapter; this section focuses on the conceptual and research framework used within this research study. The one aspect not reviewed is the case study methodology, as I did not use it in a unique manner that requires reflection; the case study methodology was appropriate for this study and I would recommend anyone doing a similar research project to consider utilizing a case study methodology.

The marriage of political organization theory and organizational culture seemed 'odd' at first. I am, however, glad that I stuck with this conceptual framework. At the beginning, I felt like I was trying to combine two contradictory theoretical approaches, as the many theorists treat organizational culture and the political organization as having separate theoretical foundations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). However, power and conflict both exist within the university and needs to be

supported by cultural assumptions to maintain its legitimacy. New members of the organization also need to be socialized into accepting the power structures in operation, such as the students' union within the university's authority structures. Instead, I found these two theoretical approaches—political and cultural—inextricably linked and support each other throughout the research process. This also worked well with the critical and constructivist ontological and epistemological position I took for this research.

I cannot imagine a different epistemological and ontological position for this research other than critical and constructivist; the social arena of the university as a negotiated culture requires concurrent appreciation for the different perspectives that exist within that arena, in addition to the power dynamics that are at play (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1979, 1981). Negotiation requires divergent realities to exist, and in any negotiation, there is a winner and a loser. Power dictates whom those winners and losers will be. Further, as organizations are “less social fact and more ongoing social definition” the flexibility that a critical interpretivist framework offered was important to identify the interpretations at play within the social world (Tierney, 2008, p. 13). Research is only capable of capturing an organization as a snapshot in time as reality itself is constantly changing (Giddens, 1984). Structural properties—like culture— “bind” time and space together to allow for simplifications and consistency. Systems, as a result, exist only in the specific time and space human actors use social practices to reproduce structural properties (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). I must say, however, that learning what a critical and constructivist epistemological and ontology theoretical framework has been the

greatest learning for my own personal development. I now understand the world in a completely different manner, one that I can play with over time to make sense out of my experiences.

The methods used—especially the adapted interpretive panels and drawings—ended being a great choice to exploring these questions. It allowed for collection of nuanced data, especially within a cultural analysis, and was great in finding how these different perspectives and perceptions worked together. I considered different perspectives on the same concepts and ideas, which was helpful using constructivism within a power relationship. I do wish my coding and analysis had been more systematic in form. It was a great learning opportunity to use myself as the tool of analysis, but additional structure would have been helpful as a new researcher. It felt a bit like I was reaching around in the dark. Upon reflection, I can see that it was not like that, but in the moment, self-doubt overtook capacity. Semi-structured interviews and ethnography were used in a very traditional manner and allowed for a fuller picture to develop. The free-flowing nature of the semi-structured interviews was necessary to develop the relationship with participants to elicit real and reflective perspectives. Ethnographic research—in particular, observation at meetings—was critical in providing additional context to the themes and knowledge I was finding.

Effectively, I am to determine here what I would do differently if I could re-do my study. The short answer is: nothing. Since constructing my conceptual framework at the beginning of this dissertation, I have learned an incredible amount about research and its philosophies. I used to think that I did this whole dissertation

wrong; that my conceptual framework and research methodologies were illogical and inappropriate. But the challenge of figuring out how to find the value in my work has created a better academic and researcher. I value all the learning I received and I am excited to see where my quest for answers to my new questions will lead me.

### **New Avenues for Research**

This dissertation investigated a subject that had never been previously researched to any significant depth. While several important insights were gained, one of the most significant outcomes is learning how to study students' unions; we now have something substantial to work from when discussing the students' union and the university. The value of this knowledge is not necessarily the immediate outcomes, but in what could be. A few tangents for possible research that was beyond the scope for this dissertation, or presented new and interesting areas that more data is needed to investigate. Potential research is grouped into six sections below. General topics are the relationship between individual students and their university; what prompts Executive members to choose coercion over professional influence tactics; examination of power and culture specifically within the students' union; term lengths; non-students' union student leadership; the purpose and identity of university administration; and, an expansion of the study to other universities to identify larger scale trends.

### **Students and Their University**

Universities have a strong history of democratic governance. In the past, citizenship within those democratic structures was almost universally restricted to



tenured faculty members. However, since the political unrest in the 1960s and 1970s students have been integrated into those democratically based collegial governance structures. Tierney (2008) argued that when students were placed on these bodies, the intent was never to give students access to governance and decision-making in the same manner as faculty, and this research adds confirmation to that perspective. The students' union's Executive Committee was integrated as professionals into collegial governance, but they lacked the ability to affect real change due to tokenism and their inability to represent the diversity in the student body. If the students' union does not represent most students—including the most engaged students, radicals—most students are not represented in the university. What then is the intent of including students within collegial governance structures? I have asked a similar question before, when I looked at institutional planning processes and student involvement in those decision-making structures. I found then that students were not considered citizens, but instead clients of the institution (Steeves, 2014). While this research does not necessarily support the argument that students are clients of the institution, it also does not support a view towards citizenship. I am left wondering what this relationship entails, and what 'problem' other than quelling student unrest was solved by including students within university governance.

As many decisions and policies that students want to influence are within the bureaucratic realm of the university, student engagement encompassed more than just collegial governance. However, I was left still wondering about the function of engaging students within the university bureaucracy. Again, students were rarely

put in a situation they had the balance of power—aside from the potentiality of coercive tactics—and, at first glance the rationale would seem to be client relations. However, administrators spoke about students being members of the community that add significance to these structures and processes. What are universities trying to accomplish with attempts at engagement with students? Whether you are looking to engage students as citizens, clients, data points, professionals, or out of political necessity, each rationale requires a different approach that would have different outcomes expected. Otherwise, we are trying to apply a solution before appropriately identifying the rationale or problem.

#### From Personal Influence to Coercion

The Executive was for the most part willing to fulfill the role necessary to pass the legitimacy test to use their personal influence to achieve their mandates, but only up to a certain point. There seemed to be a line where an Executive member was willing to shift from using personal influence to coercion, primarily through the media. A small caveat—university participants believed the students' union was much more willing to use coercion than they were, as student radicals had been conflated with the students' union Executive by several participants. Executive members would risk their access to powerful university bureaucrats if they appeared to be too radical, and as such a radical approach had been almost entirely ejected from the students' union. Student participants were more than happy to leave activist activities to non-students' union related student radicals. But, there was a point where the Executive was willing to risk this access in pursuit of their mandate. Student participants argued that “tarnishing” the reputation of the

university was how to “get stuff done” (5467-5468). I did not have an opportunity to explore this phenomenon in-depth.

### **Power and Culture with the Students’ Union**

The students’ union was reliant on their professional bureaucracy to carry out the mission of the students’ union: they filled the service gap left by the university. While advocacy and representation was part of this service gap, most participants considered the provision of concrete student services the largest role of the students’ union. Most participants expressed a great deal of respect and gratitude for the students’ union bureaucracy, and the Executive Director, who is hired by and reports to the Executive Committee and the Council of Students. These individuals operated in an environment with constantly changing and usually inexperienced organizational leadership, and were responsible for the provision of many student services on campus. They were, in effect, student services professionals.

There were some concerns raised by students’ union and university administrative participants about the level of control the students’ union bureaucracy has on the elected leadership of the Executive Committee. Individuals who work in the students’ union bureaucracy carry an immense amount of potential influence and power within the students’ union, as they were the primary mentors and agents of socialization for the Executive Committee. They were the carriers and keepers of institutional knowledge for the students’ union, which bestowed them with a large amount of power (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Baldrige, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 2008; French & Raven, 2000; Mintzberg, 1983). The power relationship between the students’ union and their bureaucracy could be examined, in addition

to how culture is created within an organization that has constant leadership change. Each student leader must be socialized not only into the students' union's culture, but also that of the university at an alarming speed. As culture is a negotiated system, the development and reproduction of culture within such an organization would be a useful and fascinating study.

### **Term lengths: is the current system adequate?**

The topic of term lengths was one of the university participants' most common insights. However, a student participant echoed this concern that one year term limits might be more of a hindrance than an addition to the students' union leadership. Currently, most student leaders in Canada—I would also suspect globally—for one year terms beginning in May and ending in April. I am aware of some deviations from the norm, but largely it would hold true across the country. Considering the universality of one-year terms, and the consistency of the topic throughout my research, it could be incredibly beneficial to students' unions and university campuses to provide more research in this area. There may be ways to increase the effectiveness of student representatives without compromising democratic norms.

### **Non-Students' Union Student Leadership**

In the collection of the ethnographic data, smaller students' associations were discussed as having their own relationship networks within the university and outside. These volunteer-based student organizations raised thousands of dollars for charities and provided valuable services to their members and the surrounding university community. Are they subject to the same legitimacy tests as the central

students' union? What is their relationship with their college or unit administration, or the units their issues or identities correspond? For example, student leadership in sustainability movements would primarily interact with the campus sustainability or environmental office, whereas business students would mostly engage with the business college's administration. If Indigenous students are required to conform in the same manner, is this not a continued effort at colonization?

### **Who or What is University Administration?**

One of the biggest challenges with preparing this dissertation was trying to find a definition of who or what was encompassed within "university administration". Initially, I had to email a former colleague who has expertise in the area to provide me with a useful definition as one was not in the literature or legislative frameworks. This question has continued to haunt me until the end, as from this research it is clear there was not a common understanding between the participants as to who or what was university administration. Considering that this was the primary target for student leaders to influence policy or services, it is a bit shocking we do not have more insight into their cultures or inner workings. Bergquist and Pawlack (2008) allotted one cultural framework in their seminal work to the 'managerial culture', which might encompass these individuals and units. However, there is an element of decision-making and acquisition of power that is important to include in an analysis. Examination of the 'Senior Administration' or 'Executive Branch' of the university's administration (i.e., see Figures 3.2 and 5.2). These terms do not exist in policy or legislation, and represents

part of the unspoken culture of the institution. A clearer understanding of how these structures work—and how they work with other authorities on campus in practice—would provide a much clearer picture of the contemporary university.

Further, this research has raised the question: are we giving administrators the tools—and time—to do their jobs appropriately? The size of university administration has ballooned in the past two decades, but administrators seem to still not have the time to reflect and proactively address problems. Both student and university participants discussed this time crunch with Figure 4.2 directly depicting most university administrators existing on piles of work and responsible to multiple clocks. Student concerns were considered off to the side of someone's desk, and student participants expressed incredibly gratitude for administrators who took the time to help them achieve their mandates. In the quest for efficiency, I wonder if we have dismantled the capacity for the system to conduct self-maintenance through reflection and proactivity.

### **Study Expansion**

The study could be expanded to see if this purpose is accurate across institutional and regional lines. This could help aid a potential new theory regarding the development of the students' union and how they operate within university power structures. Also, as we saw a disconnect in the understandings of the students' union's purpose between the Executive members and the university administration, it would be a helpful exercise to see how those understandings compare to that of the general student body.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This research has been incredibly personal for me. I care deeply about the topic itself and I believe strongly in its importance to the development and success of Canada's post-secondary education system. But, this experience has impacted my personal development not only as a researcher, a professional, and a philosopher, but as a good human being. I have integrated lessons about communication and relationships that I have learned from conducting this research and practiced them in my personal relationships with friends and family. Perhaps it was simply the right time of my life to be thinking about these concepts, but I am forever indebted to my participants and research experience for helping make me a better and more authentic person.

As I have mentioned before, my relationship with philosophy and theory prior to my PhD could be described as tenuous at best. Even after I had chosen critical interpretivism as my ontological and epistemological framework, I did not really 'get' what it was until I ran for Saskatoon City Council and the election of Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup> I have learned how to value someone as a product of their lived experience but with the personal and societal responsibility to continue questioning our perception of the world and our status in power structures that change depending on the context. It takes someone with significant and developed emotional intelligence to see how this responsibility shifts depending on context and perspective. What matters is how our actions impact the world around us, and we

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing, Donald Trump was the President-elect of the United States of America. There are numerous efforts to prevent Trump from taking office, and accusations of international interference in the general election. Time will tell.

all have a personal and societal responsibility to consider this in our every decision and engagement with the outside world.

It is important to note that not all executive members or participants would see my analysis as a problem or something that needs addressing and to be changed. Or, they lack the capacity to make that change. It was either “it’s just reality” that these power imbalances existed, or it was just part of being a students’ union. But this does not alleviate my concerns; effectively, I am worried about the democratic health of our universities.

### **Creating Democratic Structures**

In the tail end of my studies I have gained a new appreciation for inclusive policy creation and governance. One of the largest lessons I learned from my time on the students’ union was that my opponents did not have ill will; they were doing what they thought was ‘best’. Many people just have different conceptualizations as to what is ‘best’, and through the negotiation between different groups in political and cultural arenas we as a community build together a common definition of ‘best’, even if we are unaware of our actions. This negotiation requires the participation of incredibly diverse individuals to make the most appropriate and ‘best’ decision possible. If certain groups or communities do not participate in the negotiation, they have little ownership of the resulting cultural norms and assumptions. If enough groups or communities are excluded from this process the chance of disruptive and coercive tactics being used hypothetically would increase. Student radicals had no option to engage within the negotiation of university in a formal means within my



study, and considering how minimally student elites were included through formal means points to an incredibly exclusionist negotiation.

Personal incentive to maintain and reproduce cultural assumptions and norms was limited to their personal capacity to quickly learn to mimic university cultural assumptions. They did not have significant input into the creation of these cultural assumptions and norms, but they were expected to uphold them, and if a violation occurred access to the bureaucratic authority structure could be complete cut off. The students' union had to learn a complex language to participate in the university environment. This process of increasingly complexity serves to exclude a larger percentage of stakeholders. Many stakeholders, including students and the students' union, cannot engage in these discussions with the university, as they do not have the tools to do so. As such, we cannot ensure "free and open discussion by all relevant persons, with a final decision being dependent on the strength of better argument" (Howe, 2000, p. 23). As a result, many student voices are muted and when they reach a critical point, they must turn to public coercive tactics to gain power. This is not a positive interaction for either party, and these situations could have probably been largely avoided through the creation of legitimate channels for these students to participate in the university's democratic structures.

Since concluding my research I have begun expanding my theoretical knowledge base. Mouffe (1998) has influenced my thinking surrounding democratic structures and inclusions. She argued we need to "provide democratic challenge of expression for the forms of conflicts considered as legitimate" (p. 17). When people do not feel their role is legitimate, they find other ways of influencing politics

outside of these usual democratic institutions. According to Mouffe (2000, as cited in Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010) “this makes our society vulnerable to different extreme movements and radicalized groups that start to operate outside the democratic system. Such actors would thus become alienated from the political scene, becoming enemies to the political system, instead of adversaries within politics” (p. 343). I worry that in our attempt to prize efficiency and cost-effective measures that we have created an inhospitable environment for a true negotiation of organizational culture and access to power. In this way,

our everyday actions become constrained by economic and bureaucratic systems. I do things, not because I want to or even because they make sense to me. Rather, I do them because the system demands them of me. Crucially, because a system is organised instrumentally and in terms of its quantitative efficiency, it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss and evaluate it using ordinary language. (Mouffe, 1998, pp. 134-135)

The capacity to even participate in the conversations surrounding systems and structures have become complex. As a result, there is degradation in the quality of discussions; people are increasingly further away from the decisions and/or problems and are incapable of engaging in the conversation they cannot see or understand (Cohen & Marche, 1986).

We need to constantly question ourselves and be open to being questioned; recognize the institution is diverse and needs all parts to be a community. Perhaps there is a bit of an imbalance right now in power, but this can be re-aligned; it just takes a community to step up and say ‘no more’. Tenured faculty have the most

stability and the professional authority and power to motivate change. But, there must be a will from students, faculty, and administration before any type of large-scale change can occur. This is not to say administration purposefully excludes students or created these complex structures and processes; they are part of a larger system that reinforces this behaviour through budget challenges, lack of critical discussion of universities and post-secondary education, and demands to be everything to everyone. Life becomes regulated to a series of 'to-do' lists with no ability or time to reflect. As a result, we lose sight of what is happening because of how the system runs, and the reality is there is limited to no student perspective present in that system. This is not any one person's 'fault', but instead is the result of a system 'run amok' and insulated.

Tierney (2008) argued

over the last generation there has been considerable discussion about the nature of inquiry. Broadly stated, history pertained to analyses of great men, not women, and minorities seemed not to exist if one were to read about any number of components of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. My concern is similar when we look at the research on governance in higher education. If one is to look at such research, one needs to consider what exists, but also what—and who—is absent. Such a suggestion points to the theoretical frameworks upon which the research rest. (pp. 148-149)

We need to start considering our challenges and realities on our post-secondary education campuses with more diverse approaches. The literature to date has been concentrated on frameworks based in corporate governance; this is not to say there

is no value in these frameworks, but balance is needed to have an appropriate societal negotiation of our culture and the assumptions we work within. Universities are supposed to be democratic spaces for the exchange of ideas, but our research conducted about them is based in one paradigm, and that does not allow for a critical discourse, which should always be at the centre of public institutions. Critical theory is one framework that can provide significant insight to the management and operation of our universities, but there are many others that can bring value to the discussion. These ideas are to be debated, tested, amended, and perhaps ultimately discarded, but they begin to shed light on the large void in our knowledge of students' unions and how culture on university campuses forms and operates.

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## **APPENDIX A: Introductory Letter to Interview Participants**

### *Why Can't We All Just Get Along? Inter-Cultural Relations Between Students' Unions and Universities in Canada*

Hello,

My name is Josie Steeves. I am currently working toward a PhD in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. Generally my research interests include higher education, organizational culture, student unions, university politics, and Aboriginal post-secondary education.

Currently, I am conducting a study for my dissertation that will examine the inter-cultural relationships between student unions and their administrative counterparts in universities in Western Canada.

I will be conducting one-on-one confidential interviews with students' union executive members and their administrative counterparts, in addition to forming "interpretive panels" of those who were interviewed. I will ask these panels to interpret the outcomes of the alternative subunit within their institution. For example, the group of administrators will be asked to interpret the data from the interviews conducted with the students' union executive members. All names and identifying markers will be removed in order to protect anonymity.

This research has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Sciences Research on October, 2014.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and if you participate in an interview and interpretive panel I will strive to protect your confidentiality.

If you are interested in participating, I would be very pleased to organize a time to meet with you or discuss the research project via telephone. Please send me a quick email at [josie.steeves@usask.ca](mailto:josie.steeves@usask.ca) or give me a call at (306) 341-2771. If you have any questions, please feel free to send me email or call me, as well; or you may contact my supervisor, Dr. David Burgess, Head of the Department of Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon at [david.burgess@usask.ca](mailto:david.burgess@usask.ca).

I hope to hear from you soon.

Best Regards,

Josie Steeves

## **APPENDIX B: Participant Consent Form**

Project Title: *Inter-Cultural Understandings of Students' Unions and Universities in Canada*

Researcher: Josie Steeves, PhD Candidate  
Department of Educational Administration  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 341 – 2771  
[josie.steeves@usask.ca](mailto:josie.steeves@usask.ca)

Supervisor: Dr. David Burgess  
Department of Educational Administration  
University of Saskatchewan  
[david.burgess@usask.ca](mailto:david.burgess@usask.ca)

I appreciate your participation in the study. The purpose of this study is to examine the organizational cultures of students' unions and administration within a university and how they affect interorganizational relationships. To achieve this goal, I will adhere to the following guidelines designed to protect the interests of everyone taking part:

1. I will interview you to discuss your perceptions of the purpose of a students' union. There are no known or anticipated risks to you participating in this research.
2. You will be initially interviewed once one-on-one (for roughly a hour). The interview will be audio-recorded and you will be free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. The interpretive panels (within a group setting) will also be audio-recorded and you will again be free to control the tape recorder.
3. Each audio recording will be transcribed and analysed to discover major themes that were discussed. You will be presented with a "smoothed narrative" version of the transcript—where false starts, repetitions, and paralinguistic utterances are removed to improve readability. You will be asked to check the transcription to clarify and add information, so as to construct the meanings and interpretations that become "data" for later interpretation by myself as researcher. You may delete anything you do not wish to be quoted within the study.
4. Participation is completely voluntary. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data has been pooled to develop the interview guide for the interpretive panels. If you choose to withdraw, the audio recordings, transcripts and interview data will be destroyed.
5. Audio recordings and the results of this study will be securely stored with Dr. David Burgess, Head of the Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, and retained for a

- minimum of five years in accordance with University Council guidelines.
6. The results of the study will be disseminated in the form of a Doctoral Dissertation and may be published in articles in a scholarly journal or presented at conferences. Your confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. However, in the interpretive panel you understand that confidentiality may not be fully protected and cannot be promised, as the researcher holds no authority over you or your fellow participants. In the participation of the interpretive panel you agree, however, to protect the confidentiality of fellow participants.

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved this research on ethical grounds on December 9, 2014. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Questions about the project can be address to myself ([josie.steeves@usask.ca](mailto:josie.steeves@usask.ca)), or to Dr. David Burgess, Head of the Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, at [david.burgess@usask.ca](mailto:david.burgess@usask.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Researcher</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## APPENDIX C: Data/Transcript Release Form for Interview Participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I very much appreciate your participation in the study, *Why Can't We All Just Get Along? Inter-Cultural Relations Between Students' Unions and Universities in Canada*. Please fill your name below, read the paragraphs that follow and if you are comfortable that the transcript accurately reflects your words please sign where indicated.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the completed transcript of my personal interview, and acknowledge that the transcripts accurately reflect what I said in my interview with Josie Steeves.

I authorize the researcher to use any artifacts that I have provided for this study. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Josie Steeves and/or Dr. David Burgess to be used in the manner described in the letter of consent.

I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant's signature:

Researcher's signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Josie Steeves

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your contributions are greatly appreciated.

**APPENDIX D: Data/Transcript Release Form for Interpretive Panel  
Participants**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I very much appreciate your participation in the study, *Why Can't We All Just Get Along? Inter-Cultural Relations Between Students' Unions and Universities in Canada*. Please fill your name below, read the paragraphs that follow and if you are comfortable that the transcript accurately reflects your words please sign where indicated.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the completed transcript of the interpretive panel, and acknowledge that the transcripts accurately reflect what I said in my interview with Josie Steeves.

I authorize the researcher to use any artefacts that I have provided for this study. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Josie Steeves and/or Dr. David Burgess to be used in the manner described in the letter of consent.

I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant's signature:

Researcher's signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Josie Steeves

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your contributions are greatly appreciated.

## APPENDIX E: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

### Students' Union Participants

#### 1. Environment

- a. What is a students' union? What is a university? What/who is university administration?
- b. What is the role of a students' union?
- c. What makes a students' union effective or not?
- d. What is the position/place of a students' union within the university?
- e. Do you feel the students' union is separate from the university? Why or why not?

#### 2. Mission

- a. What is the mission of the students' union?
- b. Who defines the mission?
- c. If it were up to you, how would you define the mission? What changes, if any, would you make? (*present the mission statement*)
- d. Do you feel the students' union follows the mission? Why or why not?
- e. Do you think the students' union ought to have a separate mission from the university?
- f. What is the mission of the university? What would be different from that of the students' union?

#### 3. Socialization

- a. How are new students' union executive members introduced to members of the administration?
- b. What do you perceive one needs to know to survive/excel in the students' union?
- c. How involved should the university be in the **socialization** of students' union executive members?

#### 4. Information

- a. What kind of information does the students' union need from the university? How accessible is it?
- b. What kind of information does the students' union have?
- c. How does the students' union disseminate information? Is it done effectively? (*keep in mind if they talk about membership*)

#### 5. Strategy

- a. How does the students' union make decisions?
- b. Who makes these decisions?
- c. What is the penalty for making a bad decision?
- d. What strategies do you find are successful in reaching desired results when working with the administration? For example, if you're lobbying an administrator on tuition fees, do you have ways to get what you want?

#### 6. Leadership

- a. Who is the leader of the students' union? Are there many? Is there a power hierarchy?

- b. Are there formal and informal leaders? If yes, who? What influence do they have? (*might have to flush out 'formal' and 'informal'*)
- c. What does the students' union expect from its leaders?
- d. What responsibility does/should the university have for the students' union? How much power should/does the university have over the students' union?
- e. How important do you feel the decisions and activities of the students' union are to the university?

## **END QUESTION**

In five sentences, from your perspective what is the purpose of a students' union?

## **Administrative Participants**

Themes (Tierney, 2008, p. 30)

### **1. Environment**

- a. What is a students' union?
- b. What makes a students' union effective or not?
- c. What is the role of a students' union?
- d. Do you perceive the students' union as separate from the university organization? Why or why not?
- e. What is the position/place of a students' union within the university?

### **2. Mission**

- a. What is the mission of the students' union?
- b. Who defines the mission?
- c. Do you feel the students' union follows the mission? Why or why not?
- d. Do you think the students' union ought to have a separate mission from the university?

### **3. Socialization**

- a. How are new students' union executive members introduced to members of the administration?
- b. What do you perceive one needs to know to survive/excel in the students' union?
- c. What role does or should the university play in the socialization of students' union executive members?

### **4. Information**

- a. What kind of access to information does the students' union need from the university?
- b. What is 'information' within the students' union?
- c. How does the students' union disseminate information to its members? Is it done effectively?

### **5. Strategy**

- a. How does the students' union make decisions?
- b. Who makes these decisions?
- c. What is the penalty for making a bad decision?



- d. What strategies do you find are successful in reaching desired results when working with the students' union?

**6. Leadership**

- a. Who is the leader of the students' union? Are there many? Is there a power hierarchy?
- b. Are there formal and informal leaders? If yes, who? What influence do they have?
- c. What does the students' union expect from its leaders?
- d. How much influence or responsibility does/should the university have over the students' union?
- e. How important do you feel the decisions and activities of the students' union are to the university itself?

**END QUESTION**

In five sentences, from your perspective what is the purpose of a students' union?

## **APPENDIX F: Interpretive Panel Guide**

### **1. Introduction**

- a. Welcome! Thank you so very much for assisting me with this project. Hopefully I will be able to use what I learn to help students' unions and administration work together in the most productive manner.
- b. Before I get started have some cookies! They have peanut butter in them.

### **2. Process**

- a. This will be recorded with the same devices I did in the individual interviews. Just like last time you have complete control over the recorders. Don't feel anything you're not comfortable with, and I will try to restrict my methods to gentle probing. Everything you say is confidential, as per my ethics approval, except for the individuals in this room for obvious reasons. Whenever an individual is mentioned in a quote a gender neutral pronoun will be used (ex: instead of him or her, him/her, etc).
- b. After this panel, I'm going to transcribe this interview and send you the transcripts like last time with the release form. I'll also be meeting with the students' union and presenting the same kind of data, but from your interviews. All identifying information will be removed. You will be able to change anything in your own words, not someone else's.
- c. After getting all the release forms I'll conduct a similar coding scheme that I used to gather this data, and combine data from my observations.
- d. If any of you want a PDF of my dissertation after all is said and done just let me know!

### **3. Background**

- a. After receiving the transcript release forms from the administration participants I did a first quick read through to identify obvious themes in the data. I read them again to develop more detailed codes, utilizing different coding approaches. I then pooled all the interview codes, moving them around until I reached a point where I felt the data were accurately and appropriate captured. I did it all with pencils, coloured pens, and coloured sticky notes; colour coded. Obv.
- b. I've decided to use three approaches today to try and facilitate the conversation.
  - i. First, I'm going to present you with word clouds describing the different definitions of the students' union, university, and university administration both groups concocted.
  - ii. Next, I'm going to present the broad themes I learned from their data. We don't have time to get really down into the data, but I'll boil it down into a few statements I feel are representative. Although I'm not going to volunteer how your responses are intersected with the students' union data, I will

bring out examples in discussion if I feel it would assist in developing or spurring the conversation.

iii. Lastly, we're going to have craft time! I'll explain what I want you to draw when it comes to that time!

4. Present word clouds

- a. 1. Students' union; 2. University; 3. University Administration.
- b. What do you see as the most significant differences/similarities between these?
- c. Why do you think those differences/similarities exist?
- d. Would you expect these types of differences or lack of differences?
- e. Would a better understanding of how both groups perceive what these definitions/roles are help you understand their behaviour?

5. Themes

- a. I'm hoping to not actually ask questions, but just to get your reactions to the data. How does the data mesh with your perceptions? Is it different or similar? Why or why not?

6. Visualize the relationship between the university and the students' union.

## **APPENDIX G: Students' Union Themes as Presented to the Administrative Interpretive Panel**

### **1. Misconceptions**

Meeting members of the university administration was a "disarming" experience. These are people who, generally, want the best for the university. They are generally friendly and reasonable.

The University President doesn't actually have that much power; "I thought s/he did everything. I thought that s/he was the boss, and that I'd be talking to her/him directly about how we make this [an initiative] happen."

### **2. Representation**

There is concern about the impact their representation on the more formalized bodies, like governance bodies, actually has. Is it meaningful, or is it tokenism?

The students' union isn't the  
"...sometimes I think the university might think that we're the be all end all, but I don't necessarily think that's true."  
"...those student leaders who are not necessarily tied to the USSU are fantastic, and heeding their advice is important."

### **Representation**

They see themselves as a condensed student voice; a conduit to the university and external world for students' needs, interests, and ideas.

Consultation with the student body largely happens through University Students' Council, who brings them the "day-to-day student" experience.

- There is a lack of infrastructure for the students' union to consult with their membership (EX: email limits).
- University Students' Council could be better integrated into the decision-making processes of the students' union, but some believe "I don't think we know what else to give them to do."

### **3. Student Engagement**

It is difficult to really know what students want as they are largely disengaged with few expectations, and their interests are incredibly varied as the student population is so heterogeneous.

Regardless, the students' union still tries to engage students in formal and informal ways (such as through personal relationships), and seek consultation/mentorship on issues and ideas.

Consultation is useless if students don't have the ability or access to information to understand the questions being asked.

#### **4. Relationships**

Executives all have to pass a “legitimacy test” by administrators and university officials. Are these student leaders willing to work? They have to almost become “mini-administrators” to be taken seriously in their roles.

“...whether we like it or not we are often playing by their rules in their house, and I think that’s often taken for granted by the university. They don’t really appreciate or realize the work that it takes and that we put in to have the view as legitimate.”

#### **4. Trust/Respect**

Trust and respect are identified as important in a number of relationships between the: executive; executive and university administration; student and the students’ union; executive and students’ union administration; and, executive and University Students’ Council.

Trust is gained through interpersonal relationships.

#### **Relationships**

The students’ union’s relationship with the university is characterized by a high level of informality and understandings of mutuality and collaboration. There is a certain level of suspicion regarding how genuine some of these relationships are, as sometimes there are feelings of patronization.

There is a danger of too close a relationship with administrators for two reasons: 1. Danger of being co-opted; 2. “The more you get to know and understand someone, the more you can understand their point of view and might be less willing to challenge and make things more difficult for them.”

#### **5. Unpredictability**

The short term in office provides a regular turnover in leadership. This is both a positive and negative, as personality then largely becomes the defining feature of the students’ union (including how well they work together, what the mission is for that year, and if they have any “personal agenda[s]”.

## **7. Leadership**

The President is the formal leader of the students' union and is an important symbol. While a hierarchy does exist within the association, the President is a "first among equals" and there is shared leadership.

Self care is important in order to be an effective student representative. Through reflection and support from loved ones, the "exhaustion," "isolation," political pressures, overwhelmed feelings, and lack of privacy can be managed.

## **Leadership**

A normative view of leadership within the students' union includes being facilitative and constructive, having an open mind, being confident, and having integrity.

In order to lead, be it executive members or for other students, there need to be opportunities to lead that have a purpose.

There are multiple non-executive leaders: students' union administration; non-elected students' union student staff; University Students' Council; non-students' union student leadership; and, confidants/friends of the executive.

## **Reality**

Time is a large limitation. The length of their terms means they're relying on other people, such as university administration, to carry out their legacies, and must trust colleagues and university administration as they cannot be everywhere at all times.

## **Reality**

The students' union and university administration have different realities. While they learn how to operate within the world of university administration, it's unlikely university administration will take the time to learn the students' union world. "...we are often playing by their rules in their house."

Administrators are "some of the busiest people that I know."

Students aren't really engaged

### **Students' Union Administration**

The students' union administration is critical for institutional knowledge/memory, "grounding" the executive, taking care of the day-to-day organizational responsibilities so the executive can focus on their mandates, in addition to having the "responsibility to ready" the executive.

The executive must put "blind trust" in their staff, who partially as a result have a lot of influence over their actions. Although staff members have good intentions, they can be a bit "disconnected from students" and can act paternalistic towards the executive.

### **8. Knowledge/Information**

The students' union largely has "qualitative information" to offer the university, acting as a "simplified voice" of students.

"Nobody gave me that information that this is the person you should go talk to, and here is the institutional memory of that, and here's some challenges you might come up against. I had to find that out by myself.... It took me a good couple of months to figure that out... I really need the university to help me navigate the institution a little bit."

### **Knowledge/Information**

The university has a lot of information, and it is difficult to know what to look for. Getting access to that information is not a problem, but you have to know what you're looking for.

### **9. Politics**

The university is a political system, and the students' union is a political organization. University administration doesn't see the university as a political system, and are wary of making decisions that might be deemed as political.

### **Power**

Sources of power include: formal relationships and hierarchical structures; informal relationships and structures; numbers (students' union membership); control of the agenda; framing issues/conversations; experience/knowledge/control of information ("information asymmetry"); charisma; and, emotional/social intelligence.

### **Students' Union/University**

The students' union is generally autonomous from the university, enjoying an "arms length relationship." The students' union is "just different" from the university, and their relations can be described as "external relations."

The university facilitates the students' union's existence, as at some point they "bleed together."

### **Students' Union/University**

There exists a power imbalance between the students' union and the university, where it should be a "partnership of equality."

Both can act as "checks and balances" on the other.

The students' union backfills services the university doesn't offer (EX: health and dental, UPASS, student space, political representation).

It's a "good faith" relationship that is unique in Canada.



## **APPENDIX H: Administrators Data as Presented to the Students' Union Interpretive Panel**

### **Relationships**

Building relationships is based on the personality of the individual: "I meet with [some of the exec] on a regular basis, but the rest of them I wouldn't recognize them at all. I'm sure it comes and goes and depends on the personalities of the people."

Most administrators meet the students' union through informal means, but there are a "...few official annual processes that kick in every year so that the right people get the right connections."

### **Relationships**

Formalized structures, like the President's Breakfast, are important in cultivating relationships.

Informal relationships and processes need to be formalized.

Informal, personable relationships are important for a positive working relationship and can be incredibly "powerful."

"But there's also a significant informal network that is exercised to make sure we get the voice of the students in our decision making processes."

### **Relationships**

"Any administration that's not working with or listening to the students is heading towards problem."

"I would worry that if we had too much of an impact [on the Executive], we would then shape their views too much for them to play anything but an ancillary role of another administrator."

Administration has limitations and it's important to not "dampen down" the students' union's ideas with these "day to day concerns."

### **Relationships**

The relationship between the University and the students' union is marked by "collegiality," and is very strong in comparison to the rest of Canada.

"If I didn't have that type of relationship [strong, respectful, positive, collegial], I probably wouldn't invest any resources into trying to make sure his/her vision is implemented."

### **Politics/Power**

There is power in the students' union mobilizing students.

The executive has the same amount of power as other people on university committees.

Faculty members respect the students' union, which gives the students' union power in the university.

The personality of the leadership within the students' union determines how much power they can have.

Students are taken less seriously than faculty are because they lack experience, don't have a PhD, and are quite young. Their short terms are also problematic.

### **Labour**

Students' unions have similar functions and flavours of the labour movement in Canada.

The students' union is the equivalent to CUPE/ASPA on campus.

### **Power/Politics**

Senior administration (President, Vice-Presidents/Provost), the Government, and the students' union exist in the political sphere.

Administrators are professionals, civil servants, and bureaucrats. However, they have a lot of power, which is vital to run the university.

### **Unpredictability**

The university is an incredibly diverse place. People on campus will have different views/opinions on the students' union and the university.

Just as the student body changes each year and will have different priorities, the interpretation of the students' union mission changes depending on the personality of the Executive.

### **Students' Union/University**

The university has "a responsibility to ensure that students' unions are following standard practices across the board so there are no questions of impropriety."

"If it's a risk to the university, if it's a risk to students, if it's contravening laws or university policy, if we have a fiduciary or legal or statutory obligation to step in then we step in...through legitimate formal mechanisms."

The university has a brand, and everyone on campus, including the students' union, has a responsibility to protect that brand.

### **Students' Union/University**

The university and students' union exist in different silos, and the university works with the students' union through an arms-reach relationship.

The students' union is the "independent voice" of students.

Council might have different priorities than the students' union, which leads to different missions between the university and students' union.

The student can do things administration can't (e.g. lobby the government for more money, UPASS, etc).

### **Students' Union/University**

The missions of the university and students' union overlap, align, and are complimentary. Some would say they are the same mission.

The university and students' union are "part of the same world."

The university should inform the students' union but not influence them, to "oversee the governance" but not the agenda.

### **Students' Union Administration**

The Executive Director plays an “administrative leadership role” and is the biggest influence on the Executive.

The staff can play too strong of a role, and can be taken more seriously in their relationship with the administration than the Executive.

The staff of the students' union is imperative for giving the Executive guidance and providing the institutional memory for the organization.

### **Leadership**

The students' union should have clear goals, work on multiple issues, and have “unity of voice” when presenting them.

Interpersonal skills are very important. Executives need to be: personable, good networkers, professionals, accountable, and they need to have motivation and drive.

Executives need integrity; they need to learn from their mistakes (as everyone makes them!) and must separate their personal and professional interests.

Communication is critical, meaning both being able to listen with an open mind and being able to articulate themselves.

### **Leadership**

Accountability is critical and should come from the student body. USC is a good feedback tool, but there seems to be a lack of ability for the student body to hold the Executive accountable.

### **Leadership**

The President is a symbol, and decisions are made primarily through that office as the VPs have a weak influence. All decisions are at least Executive dominated.

However, there is also a flat hierarchy within the students' union, with decisions made collectively and through USC.

### **Representation**

“Meaningful engagement” of students and the participation of the students’ union in making decisions on campus is incredibly important. It is the university’s responsibility to include the students’ union.

The students’ union is THE voice of students. Administration shouldn’t work with “special interest groups” unless there is a relationship with the students’ union

### **Representation**

There are potentially areas where representation could be extended. The students’ union should be integrated “into the structure of the university” and open up a space for conversations with middle management. This could give them earlier input into decision-making.

### **Representation**

There are three audiences the students’ can provide representation to:

1. The university (“voice of the customer”; voice of the students; provide administration with the “pulse” of students and identify “hot issues”);
2. Government; and,
3. Their membership (The SU as “interpreters to the students of the university; promoting respect between students).

### **Reality**

Executive members are also students who need to focus on their classes. The Executive cannot be everywhere at all times, and it is “not necessarily the job of the USSU to participate in everything.”

The short terms of the Executives are incredibly difficult to achieve anything within, and the first year (if they run twice) is almost a waste

## APPENDIX I: Administrators Data as Presented to the Students' Union Interpretive Panel



*Figure 2.1. Word Cloud depicting the students' union participant's perception of a students' union.*



*Figure 2.2. Word Cloud depicting the students' union participant's perception of a university.*



Figure 2.3. Word Cloud depicting the students' union participant's perception of university administration.

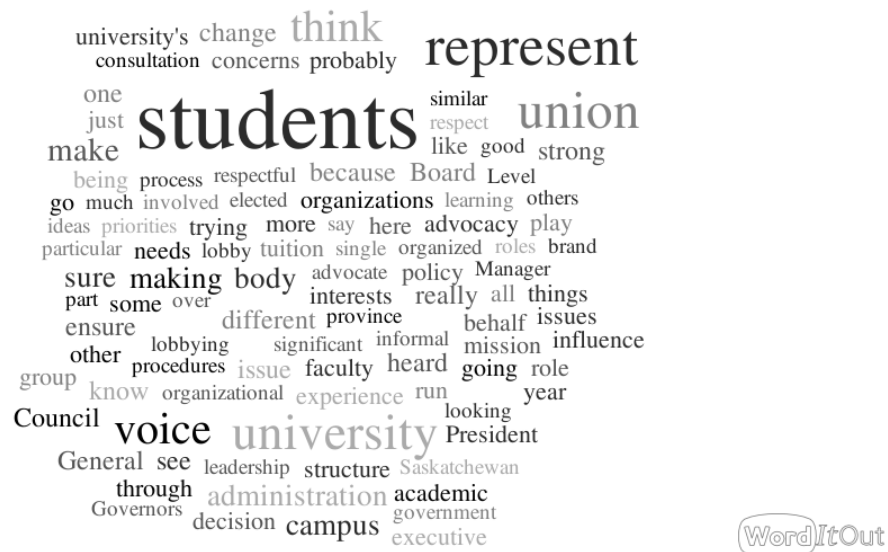


Figure 3.1. Word Cloud depicting the administrative participant's perception of a students' union.



*Figure 3.2. Word Cloud depicting the administrative participant's perception of a university.*



Figure 3.3. Word Cloud depicting the administrative participant's perception of a university administration.